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NEW
Dennis



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HE WHO BREAKS



HE WHO BREAKS

BY
INNA DEMENS



NEW YORK
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1918
W.R.C.

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It is in the silence that follows the storm, says a Hindu proverb, and not in the silence before it, that we should search for the budding flower.

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PART I



HE WHO BREAKS

CHAPTER I

THE flutter of applause, sustained for a brief, polite moment following the cessation of the music, quickly dwindled, and was immediately submerged in a growing wave of talk and movement.

From his corner of vantage near the door whence at will he could escape into the next room, Theodore Biran thanked his good star that the renown of his name served to protect him from more than a tentative smile when by chance he crossed glances with one or another of the favoured few who had been named to him in the moment before the opening number of the musical program. The assembled company, obviously not the usual audience at a pupils' recital, had been tempted—he had been given to understand by his friend and host—to attendance by the presence of the famous sculptor that rendered the occasion something more of an event than it was in reality. Biran was not naturally a modest man, but he smiled at the thought that to shake his hand could recompense these fashionable persons for the tedium they were enduring. But apparently nothing more was asked of him. In the splendid isolation of the visiting lion, he was left free to marvel at his friend Elton, who had been among the most promising of the little band of students in the old days, and to remember him later when he, Biran, from

his larger social experience had been able to introduce the clever young musician to amiable mammas with daughters in need of a music master. Worst of all, Biran knew his friend's playing had become no better than the best in this bustling, prosperous town that had welcomed him back with flattering recognition after his long absence abroad; and with something of a name already won, he had exchanged the heart-breaking hopes of greater success for the right to live out the years of his life in assured well-being. He understood now that Elton had returned by his own deliberate choice, because it had been home to him, and his bourgeois soul could strike roots nowhere else. And he had married a wife, and begotten a family, all to the end that on such occasions as the present one he was amiable host to the wealth and fashion of the town, to whose offspring he taught the art of parlour music.

Biran, his hands behind his back, considered his friend. He had not missed the almost furtive look in his eyes when Elton had broached the suggestion of this evening's entertainment. It was the regular monthly recital, but if Biran would not mind meeting a few people afterwards—? and with a tolerant contempt Biran had said "Certainly," because he had understood that the time was past when he could refuse his friend, and in his turn be understood. Mercifully, however, the program was short. Biran glanced at the bit of printed paper that had been put into his hands. Only two more numbers remained. The Grieg could not be so bad; there were no bravura effects in the simple music; and aspiring youth had rather run to bravura effects during the evening. Stoically, Biran gave himself to listen.

The same little flutter of applause, this time a bit more perfunctory, a little less prolonged, than the measure of languid approval hitherto accorded to the performers; then again the artificial animation of many words that must be crowded into the moment between numbers, seized upon the company. The animation had nothing to do with the Grieg; and Biran, from his corner, wondered if they knew that for the first time that evening, there had been music. He looked at the girl who had just played, curiously. It was too much to say he roused from his impassivity; but his eyes followed the girl as she merged inconspicuously into the shadows beyond the piano; and for the second before she turned from acknowledging the brief applause, her glance had swiftly crossed his.

Biran straightened suddenly. But for the audacity of the thing, the girl's glance might almost have been a challenge, yet the girl herself appeared so entirely incapable of an audacity.—So she knew she could play.

It was not, then, the nervous timidity of a schoolgirl before these fine people to whom she obviously did not belong, but the resentment of the artist, that had kept her eyes lowered to her violin, her glance averted, as she bowed her curt thanks. In that moment Biran irrelevantly noticed that she had tied up her yellow hair with a pink ribbon, and that curiously enough the bizarre effect was not bad. But what definitely arrested his attention was the fact that the girl could play, and above all the evidence of her eyes that she knew she could play. Why had not Elton told him?—but just then catching sight of his friend in converse with one of the ladies of fashion, it occurred to him that perhaps

Elton did not know. Then he crossed the room and stood before the girl. His only reason for speaking to her was to speak the truth, in praise and warning. "You do not play as well as you think you do, but it is possible that some day—you may be able to play—very well, even."

She met his eyes with an unexpected directness. Something of the same quality that was in her playing, still lingered in her eyes. She did not answer him in words, but Biran felt no lack of response in her silence; and the awkward self-consciousness that must have been her usual manner had not yet returned upon her. He continued in the same impersonal tone in which he had addressed her. "So much better that as yet you do not dream of it."

Her hand rose abruptly to her breast. "Something here—does not let me play—as I want to play."

"You have not laughed enough, nor cried enough."

He saw she did not understand that. "She has eyes," he was thinking to himself. Aloud he said, "It is the imprisoned tears and laughter that must melt into feeling in your heart. Until that comes to pass, one's heart lies like a stone in one's breast." No. She was not pretty. She was formless, chaotic; in all probability she did not know her own soul-hunger; or was her playing an earnest of possibilities, potentialities, no less real because she herself was unaware of them? And yet she had cried in protest against the something cold and hard in her heart that would not let her play as she wanted to play. It was not Biran's way to deny his impulses. He had spoken to the girl on unreasoned impulse; and before he left her he had offered to teach her what she could learn, of what he had once learned,

from a great master of the violin, if she cared to come here, to Elton's studio, say the following afternoon.

He did not speak with her nor see her again, until, in the first movement of departure at the end of the evening, he saw her preparing to leave, look back from the doorway, look straight at him. As she stood for a moment revealed to him through the shifting groups of departing guests, he became aware of the unexpectedly graceful line of her head and shoulders. Then she was gone before he could verify his impression. And if it was not his way to regret an experience or even a mistake, he could not but wonder a little at himself, at his offer to teach the girl. After all, she was only an immature, awkward young thing, not even pretty. . . . But she had eyes; and she could perhaps learn to play . . . if it was in her to learn.

Biran felt himself suddenly bored to the point of hiding a yawn under his hand. But he could not in decency any longer ignore the imploring messages his friend and host was sending him with eyes that were fixed in a set smile of cordiality. The guests were beginning to go, and Biran left his corner, and put himself in the way of their departure. "Sheep, bleating sheep," he scoffed to himself over the last hand shake. And, presently, alone with his host and hostess in the studio, listening to their pleased comments, he again said to himself in deep wonder and great weariness of spirit, "God, what a life!"

Still later, when Mrs. Elton had left them alone, he said to Elton, "I've promised to give one of your young ladies the benefit of something I once knew, so I'll have to borrow your violin and the studio, if it's all right with you?"

"Of course." Elton tried to meet it in the same casual way in which Biran spoke, but his curiosity asserted itself.

"Which young lady?"

"The one with the eyes."

Elton stared. "Elsa Colt, d'you mean?"

"Is that her name? Well, she's the only one of the lot who isn't wasting her money with you."

Elton laughed; that was the old Biran. "Yes. She can play."

Biran nodded. "I think—some day—perhaps she will play."

His friend refilled the glasses. He was plainly not so much interested in the girl as in Biran's interest in her. "I don't know. Sometimes I think she has something in her; but I'm not sure she'll ever amount to anything in particular. It looks as though those eyes were wasted on her."

Biran ground his cigarette into the ash tray. "But there they are," he said succinctly.

Elton considered. "I've been teaching her for a couple of years now. She improves technically, of course, but there's something wrong somewhere."

Biran looked into the smoke of his freshly lighted cigarette. "Yes."

Elton continued. "Of course, she's young—"

The sculptor rose with a sudden single movement of his body. "Man alive, have you forgotten that in its day youth is the artist's best asset?"

Elton asked curiously, "Do you think the girl has anything in her?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

"In two years she ought to have shown it, if it was

there to show." Elton merely mentioned it, disclaiming any opinion.

"Exactly. *Eh bien*. Youth passes. It is a pity, for youth is a pretty thing; but in any case—it passes—and then it is too late to learn what one can only learn when one is young and unafraid and master of one's destiny, as we so bravely are—when we are young. We adventure and learn, or we never leave port and so never know what we have missed. . . . In any case, after youth passes, we have to live the long remaining years on whatever terms youth has made for us with life." He laughed, and would have shaken off his mood with a languid movement of his shoulders. "That's where we artist chaps get ahead of the others. If we are worth our salt the price we pay is rendered back to us through our art in heaping measure, even unto the price of youth itself. And so—we live."

Elton took his pipe from his mouth. "So you still think an artist must first give himself to the Juggernaut?"

The sculptor spoke softly, looking away from his friend, looking back over the years that had given skill to his hands and knowledge to his heart and soul. "To express joy, one must have known well what it is—Joy; and one must have known the clutch at the throat before one dares speak of grief to a world that knows misery for itself. So one must go to school to life before one can learn the lessons of life. And if the passing of the Juggernaut leaves breath in his body and desire in his heart wherewith to speak . . . so the artist is born in the man."

"And if the Juggernaut never comes his way?"

The other man shook his head slowly. "Life passes

none of us by, my friend, unless we wilfully keep out of its way."

After a little silence, Elton spoke with a touch of restraint in his voice. "I saw you didn't care for my playing."

"I can't think you do yourself."

There was a thoughtful look in Elton's eyes as he waited for the lighted match from Biran's hand. "You forget—life turns a different face to each man, Biran. It may mean one thing to you and quite another to me. In fact, it always has meant different things to us. So in our different arts we express different things—"

"Don't lose yourself in words, Elton. You know as well as I do there is only one way for an artist to express himself, whatever his art. The difference is in form merely, not in substance. Your music or my modelling,—what is it but the visible form we give our emotions, what's passing or passed, in our souls and bodies and minds? You ought to know that better than most of us. Because music is primarily the art of the emotions. You must have had at least the materials of emotion in your heart and mind before you could make music. Even a naked savage beating a tomtom expresses the feelings that set him to beating it."

Elton smiled slowly, a little maliciously. "I know. You used to say that the secret of life was in love. In the old days you were always in love. Well, you knew how to love; I didn't."

Biran shrugged his shoulders. "Love? A woman lured me, and I followed. So I learned much about love."

"And that taught you to make living figures out of marble?" Elton was smiling, uncertainly, stubbornly.

"It taught me what made all the rest possible, inevitable. It taught me to feel; and that a man need not break his heart over a woman when there was work to be done; when love was barren I turned to art, and when art grew barren I returned to love, one fructifying the other. Only, if a man is an artist, love is the pollen he brings back to his art."

"Hang it, man, a chap can't go about the world falling in love because it might be good for his art."

A picture of the evening just passed flashed before Biran; he saw again his friend Elton's pride and satisfaction among his guests of distinction; his wife's air of gratified ambition. And the retort obvious died on his lips. When a man loses perception of the ironically humorous possibilities that lurk in a situation . . . and Elton was thoughtfully, seriously in earnest. "Say, rather, it is a law of nature. A man can have no good of his life, and it is doubly true of the artist, without a woman to live for, or a woman to forget in his work."

The glowing end of his cigarette held Elton's gaze. "A woman never lured me." His eyes met the other man's for a contending moment. And Biran said quietly, "No."

Elton seemed to be battling for something, resisting, without quite knowing what it was he resisted. "But there are other things in life besides love—that kind of love."

"Exactly. But by the same token there is nothing under the sun that will so profitably quicken a man's imagination as love; and it is just in proportion to his imagination that the number of things in a man's life to make it worth while, multiply."

Elton laughed. "There wasn't anything imaginary about all those months and years when you stopped working hardly long enough to eat and sleep. No love of woman could have taught you to make a plaster arm look like one of flesh and blood."

"And what did all my herculean labour amount to, or produce, but lifeless images until the day the stuff came to life under my fingers in the image of a woman's face?"

"Well then, it's your temperament."

The slight shrug of Biran's shoulders was eloquent of all he admitted. "There is no emotion so revealing, so expansive, so all-inclusive, as love, the love of a man and a woman. It embraces the entire scale of human emotions,—cold and heat, starvation, repletion, hope, despair, all the agonies of uncertainty, the fleeting joys of fulfilment, the disillusionings of desires attained,—soul and body and spirit plunged into the darkness of night, or dazzled by the light of high heaven. All this a man sees in the eyes of the beloved woman."

Elton spoke slowly. "That's exactly how you used to talk in the old days."

"It's the truth of life to me; and I've lived since as I believed then."

They smoked in silence, Elton blowing great clouds of smoke, Biran smoking quietly. "A scientist would not presume to talk on hearsay. The truth, and to know the truth, is the common creed of the artist and the scientist. How else? No one would dream of censuring the scientist for his experiments on the human body. And an artist has to make *his* experiments and discoveries on the hearts and souls of men and women. His art will have the depth and surety of the man's

knowledge and experience. It will realize all that is good and all that is bad in his life, all that is beautiful and all that is ugly; all that the artist can learn only through the man; and give back to the world of men through his art. That is what we artist chaps are here for, to see things and feel them, to be eyes and ears and tongue to a world that is too busy and too indifferent to realize all these things for itself. That is the difference between the artist and the man who lives his own life for himself alone,—the artist must know all things and shun no knowledge, if he is to speak to the hearts of all men. You cannot hope to catch the ear of a world that knows everything intuitively,—all any man of them knows articulately for himself,—unless you have known and felt in your own what is in the secret soul of every man. And a man is an artist or a journeyman accordingly.”

Elton made shift to smile. “Therefore are you the great Biran, while I am Mr. Elton who teaches young ladies to fiddle.”

Biran met his friend's eyes gravely, frankly. “We hated to see you quit us when you came away.”

The other man laughed. “Oh, you don't need me to prove your point. Your work speaks for itself. You have fame and success. It doesn't look as if you had missed much of anything life has to give.” He succeeded no better with his second match than he had with the first one, and lighted his pipe with the burned match thrust rather petulantly into the flame of the ornately shaded candle at his elbow. “Well, it's too late now anyhow, if I ever could have.” Then his heels clicked suddenly to the floor. He came to it slowly. “Is that what's the matter with Elsa Colt?”

"You know how she plays."

"D'you know, Biran, it's a curious thing; but sometimes after I've given that Colt girl a lesson I have a hankering to do something myself."

Biran nodded. "Exactly. I've gone home after seeing a particularly good piece of work and modelled noses for a week."

"But she doesn't really play well at all."

"Just what I told her."

"It'll bore you to listen to her technique."

"I have no intention of listening to her technique."

A sudden illumination came to Elton. He threw back his head, assumed a more easy position, mentally and bodily. His whole attitude expressed his unvoiced conclusion. "I see." His slight smile invited Biran's confidence, while his look seemed to say he was more a man of the world than Biran had given him credit for being. "So it's her eyes."

But Biran passed it by in silence. He was not a little bored. If he had had any hope of Elton, it was gone now. They no longer spoke the same language; apparently Elton could not understand that a woman and her eyes and her playing were all one and inseparable. He, Biran, would never have noticed her eyes were it not for her playing, just as very possibly he would not have given another thought to the girl's playing had he not seen her eyes. At all events, he had not offered to teach her for the sole sake of her eyes. But until he had heard her play again, he was interested in his own judgment. To the girl herself, as a girl, he hardly gave a thought. But he did not think he had made a mistake in his judgment that she played rather better than one expected a girl to play; and

Biran was not of those who choose to pass by on the other side. Yet had he desired to enlighten Elton as to his motives he could not, in a word, have said what had moved him to speak to Elsa Colt. Even a frankly ugly woman not infrequently has her good points; but the girl was no more ugly than she was pretty. And if he did not take Elton into his confidence, perhaps what most interested Biran was the potentiality of both ugliness and beauty in the girl's face.

But Elton, suddenly realizing the full significance of his own idea, was less inclined to smile over it. A note almost of remonstrance sounded in his voice. "See here, Tito," he used the old friendly name for the first time, "you aren't thinking of anything of that sort—" He put it indefinitely, but his intonation was self-evident in its meaning. "Not with Elsa Colt?"

Biran kept him waiting for an answer. "And why not Elsa Colt?"

Elton tried for a light note, but his eyes were anxious. "She's got less to say for herself—in words and looks—than you're accustomed to in girls, for one thing." After all, the blame would fall heaviest upon his shoulders, if anything of the kind were to happen. . . . "Besides, you know," he did not quite know how to say it, "it isn't—this isn't—we don't go in for that sort of thing," he rather blurted it, "the girl wouldn't understand. She's not that kind—"

Biran was wilfully nonchalant. "She's a woman-creature. Why shouldn't she understand?—whatever it is you are talking about. As for 'that sort of thing,' one is just a man or a woman, whether one lives in Paris or in Timbuctoo."

"It's different here." Elton stuck to his point. He rose and joined Biran where he leaned against the mantel-shelf. His round, good-looking face, the indeterminate features and conciliatory smile, were in strong contrast to the other man's expression of concentrated force. Where Biran's look was direct with the directness of an informing idea, Elton's glance was diffuse and slightly uncertain. There was the suggestion of a slouch about his shoulders as he stood opposite Biran, whose lean figure even in full repose retained its consciousness of power. Biran had a disconcerting way of answering merely "Yes." It left the conversation hanging in the air, and Elton, uncomfortable in the silence, uncomfortable before the turn their words had taken, continued to talk volubly about the girl after they had apparently done with her. "I've thought sometimes it was because she *was* a girl, a woman-creature as you put it; because with her ability she ought to make a better showing. But women don't, somehow."

Biran regarded him across the smoke haze. "And yet I'll tell you this about women, O man whom woman never lured; a woman's heart is the most responsive instrument this world of men and sorrows has ever fashioned. And sometimes, when the right hand touches the mute strings, and a woman speaks to the world. . . . For that moment it is worth while to have lived, and waited, my friend."

The music master smiled almost maliciously. "I wonder if your beautiful idea would survive my experience, year in, year out—"

For a moment it was in Biran's mind to ask Elton how he had come to do it; then he looked at the music

master's face and comfortable figure, remembered his friend's wife, and the friends of his friend's wife, and the patrons of his friend; and remained silent. In the little silence he thought of other men, once students and comrades with himself and Elton, now scattered to the far corners of the earth; following the devious paths that led to success, to failure; one and another had achieved fame and fortune; had any found happiness? Here was he, Biran—satiated with success, yet jealous of every pang that it had cost him—and Elton, warming their hands together by Elton's hearthfire. . . . Elton, to whom the passing years had meant a wife, and the little family that absorbed his efforts, and contracted his emotional horizon within the limits of necessity and the pride of a responsible householder.

It was growing late. Obviously they had nothing more to say to each other. The more they spoke together the less they seemed to understand. Biran wondered why he did not go, now that there was no longer any necessity to remain. Was it that having no hearthfire of his own, he lingered by Elton's? But he would not light another cigarette; presently he bade his old friend good-night; and took his way into the starlit night.

CHAPTER II

ELSA COLT came to the studio the next afternoon accompanied by an elderly sister whose countenance gave one the impression of being expressionless for fear of expressing too much, or too openly. There was a little pause after the halting greetings. Biran had not anticipated the elderly sister. And although he had expected nothing he was conscious of disappointment in the girl herself. It was as if he saw her now for the first time. In her street clothes she lacked whatever of distinction the pink ribbon in her hair had achieved for her the evening before; while her eyes had merely a commonplace prettiness under the ungraceful brim of her hat. Somewhat precipitately, Biran busied himself with taking Elsa's violin out of its case. And the elderly sister having betaken herself to an uncomfortable chair at a disapproving distance, and the girl thus left alone, she came presently, violin in hand, to stand hesitatingly beside Biran. She had taken off her coat and after feeling nervously for the hatpins had not, in the end, removed her hat. But when he was ready she gave Biran the note he needed on the piano; and for an instant he had again a glimpse of her eyes as he had seen them the evening before, when it had seemed her glance leaped to his in challenge.

"Wouldn't it be better without your hat?"

She took it off then without a word, and Biran took it from her, and with it her violin, and put into her hands Elton's instrument. Her own was impossible.

He had wondered the evening before how she had gotten such music out of it. She flushed slightly, with embarrassment, or a keen pleasure in the mere touch of the time-burnished violin, Biran could not be sure. At all events, she had that rarest of charming tricks, to blush becomingly. Then, quite unexpectedly, she smiled. It was the first time Biran had seen her smile. But the flash was gone almost as soon as it showed in her eyes. Then he asked her to play, the Grieg that had been her number on the recital program. At a little distance, half-turned away from her, he listened and watched; watched more intently than he listened. It had passed through his thoughts the previous evening that the question of her future as a maker of music most certainly lay in her personality; that the final determining factor in her playing would be what she herself, as an individual, brought to it . . . his thoughts continued the trend of his conversation with Elton. Each personality must inevitably fulfil its human destiny before achieving its artistic expression. One might as reasonably expect an eagle to soar to the clouds without wings to upbear it.

He kept the girl playing for an hour. She showed no effort of fatigue, made no pretence of fearing to tire him. She was thinking of the music, and only of the music. Biran hardly heard the time-worn repertoire to which Elton had characteristically remained faithful. After the first few minutes he knew he was not mistaken about the girl's playing. But now he reserved his judgment. He was watching her closely. Absorbed in her playing, her expression remained indeterminate. To the artist's critical eye she looked young with the youngness of immaturity, rather than with the com-

elling youngness of Youth. But there was a redeeming quality in the little air of withdrawal into herself, just as there was something distinguishing in the awkward poise of the graceful head. Biran meditated it thoughtfully. Something about the girl reminded him of his own youthful efforts to model into his clay figures the idea that lived in his head, when yet there was always something lacking that spoiled it all. . . . It was with the girl as it had been with his clay figures. No light kindled within. She was trying to make music out of a soul plunged into the voiceless depths of its own isolation. So, presently, he told her to rest. She was reluctant to yield up the violin, held it lingeringly in her hands. Biran did not speak. He waited, curious, ironically a little sorry for her. He had found out what he wanted to know. She was at least responsive, and in all fairness one could not expect expression of that which there was not yet to express. Unmindful of the elderly sister, he indicated a chair to Elsa, and himself sat down near her. He had not known if he would ask her to come again. Now he asked abruptly,

"What are you intending to do, or are you merely taking lessons to fill in the time?"

"I think—I suppose I will teach." It seemed to need explanation, so she added, "Mr. Elton tells me I may be able to teach."

"Do you want to teach?"

Biran could have laughed at the sudden, resentful look she flashed at him; then her eyes lowered to her hands and she said merely, "No."

"You want to become a musician, an artist?" He felt he was being cruel. And the girl's glance told him

he was cruel. "Why not go away to study, and become a musician?"

"I mayn't even be able to study with Mr. Elton much longer, unless I begin to teach soon."

"Why?"

"My family call it—fiddling."

Biran laughed, and after a doubtful second the girl smiled with him. Evidently she had not intended to say anything amusing. But after that it was easier to talk. She spoke, somewhat breathlessly, of the joy of playing on the violin she still held in her hand; and Biran asked her a question or two, to which she answered briefly, but without another flash of the spirit with which she had delineated her family's attitude toward her fiddling. When presently they remembered the elderly sister, and Biran crossed the room to her, he asked in the manner of a concluding phrase, "I hope Miss Elsa will care to come again."

Almost visibly, Miss Colt came to a resolution. She arranged the narrow piece of fur she wore more angularly around her neck. "We appreciate your kindness—it is an honour—that you felt an interest in my sister's playing—" Her voice thanked him for the honour while her attitude of mind and body conveyed entire disapproval. The whole thing was irregular, not to be encouraged. "But of course—your time is very valuable—I am afraid it would be quite impossible for Elsa—to avail herself of your kind offer. Any use she might make of her music would hardly justify us—"

"Your sister has talent, Miss Colt. Talent of a high order, I should say." It occurred to Biran that a dozen or so years ago this unsmiling, unbending spinster, who was taking it upon herself to decide her sister's future

by calmly ignoring its possibility, had been like the girl Elsa herself,—who still delayed to join them.

Then she came, silent, waiting. Biran made his answer to her. "If Miss Elsa cares to come, it will be my pleasure to play with her for the pleasure it will be to me."

Miss Colt remained silent, stonily noncommittal. Over her shoulder Biran could see the ungraceful brim of the girl's hat; and observing the sister, he knew there was an equal chance that his offer might be refused. The girl had said they called it fiddling, and he had seen nothing in her to give him to suppose that she was not at least capable of accepting the verdict of her family. For a moment he was tempted to give her the chance to make the effort to accept his offer, to avail herself of this opportunity to assert her individuality, over the family's refusal. For he saw refusal in the sister's face. 'It was even on the cards that the girl herself might not choose to accept favours from a stranger,—a strange man, they would call him. Then as suddenly something said to him it would not be fair to put her to the test when it was almost certain she was not prepared to meet it. He came to a quick resolve. Turning to Miss Colt, he explained it precisely. "This is my vacation,"—he went back to original causes, electing to satisfy the sister's scruples. "I am after no fashion a teacher of the violin, but I have had the privilege of studying with a great master,—so, as I said, if your sister will give me the pleasure I shall be happy to share with her whatever of skill remains to me." His manner, his smile, disposed of the question as definitely settled between them. Before she was aware of what had happened, Biran was bowing over Miss Colt's hand. "It is very

good of you—" Apparently they were parting on terms of the best understanding and amicability. He accompanied the sisters to the door of the studio, where in her turn Elsa timidly offered her hand, and he quickly anticipated the words of thanks he saw verging on her lips, more to spare himself than the girl. "Until to-morrow," he bowed them forth.

Alone in the studio, he was moved to smile at himself. However . . . Then he lighted a cigarette, took up the violin, played some fragmentary interludes, recalling an interesting interpretation the girl had given to certain passages. "Elton did not teach her that." He put aside the violin, looked at his watch, remembered regretfully that he had promised to wait for Elton. He was suddenly restless; his mood needed expression, if only in physical movement. . . .

Biran swung about on the piano stool as Elton came into the studio. "You're through here for the day by half-past four, aren't you?"

Elton smiled with the good-natured expansiveness of a young man verging on middle-aged stoutness. "So she's coming again, is she?"

"Yes."

"What do you think of her?"

Biran turned back to the piano. "It's always been one of my beliefs that everybody ought to have a chance in this world."

Elton had unfastened a roll of music, and, spreading it out on the top of the piano, stood facing Biran, dividing his attention between his friend and the musical scores, while Biran's fingers murmured an arpeggio on the piano. His hands paused for a moment above the piles of music; then he thought better of it; and merely

altered the arrangement of the loose sheets. "Planning to make an artist of the girl in a week, are you?" To a finely discerning ear it was plain some back thought rankled in the words.

"I may be able to put her on the right road. Lots of persons in this world would never arrive anywhere because they become confused among the sign-posts."

"What does the girl think of your offer?"

"The sister made difficulties about terms, while little Miss Big Eyes waited with suspended breath."

"And what are your terms?" This time Elton looked up, met the other man's look. There was a whimsical light in Biran's eyes, but something of a deeper seriousness as well, although he smiled. "The same as life's—nothing for nothing; and take one's chances along with the rest of the world,—one's all for life's all. It remains to be seen what price the girl can command to pay; if she has it in her to drive a good bargain." His hands on the keys suddenly found the melody his mood had been seeking, and he played it through, tenderly, forcefully, as no master save one's own nature can give one the power to express. Elton, listening, fought the new knowledge in his soul. But it held him in the relentless grip of the truth, and he read the secret of Biran's sculptured figures, exquisite, strong, compelling, in Biran's music. The man was his art, just as his art was the man. It was flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone; what the man was so was his art; it had always been Biran's creed; he had dreamed it, believed it, lived it. Above all, lived it. And it had brought him fame, success, and whatever of happiness he chose for himself. What the world called genius, inspiration,—it was as Biran said; the soul of the man

the artist made visible to the world of men. Elton's hands were quite still on the piles of music as Biran continued playing. A little reluctantly, the glances of the two men met. The question stalked between them. And divining the not quite friendly regard in his friend's eyes, an almost visible repudiation of the arguments he did not accept yet could not deny, while forced to render to the artist whose life and work voiced it, a reluctant and it might well be a hostile homage—quite unexpectedly Biran felt the old feeling for Elton waken in himself. The puzzled, rebellious look recalled many memories of the old days when it had fallen to his lot to explain many things to Elton. That he had frequently failed to make him understand. . . . Nevertheless, he tried again now, speaking to the man as he would have spoken to the youth in their student days together. He would try to explain to him the puzzled look in his own eyes; and he spoke of himself because it was his presence that troubled his friend. “. . . Once upon a time, because a charming woman was true to her husband . . . and would not let me speak with words, I learned to speak to her with my music. But she taught me only to want to love. That was not enough. . . . Then she went out of my life. That was before you knew me. I did not play, for years, after that. But I had learned to play—well enough. If I had really loved her, I should have learned to play—better than well enough. But when you first knew me, I was making clay images.” The music died under his fingers. “You said last night I was always in love, and so I was,—the lovely ladies were always so lovely,—but still, they were none the less clay images, all those Dianas and Ariadnes I slaved

over, and you chaps used to shove out of the way when you wanted to stretch your legs.—I suppose I've loved other women since, but it was the woman who taught me to love who gave me the gift of my life. You know—how almost overnight the dummy figures became alive. So if everything in this world has a price, when one has paid the price there must be something to show for it." A cigarette took his attention for a moment, then he rose and crossed to the fireplace to dispose of the burnt match. "You have your home, your family life, and I have—my fame. It doesn't even leave a question between us." He said the last words briskly, with an altered intonation. It had suddenly occurred to him that to convince Elton would not be to do a kindness to his friend. He had not spoken with any intention of disturbing the music master's peace of mind and satisfaction in the way he had chosen. But he had spoken more warmly, more feelingly, than he had intended, than the occasion warranted, remembering Elton among his wealthy patrons. For the moment he had been sorry for his old friend, had even felt a little embarrassed, almost apologetic, for the difference in their lot in life. Watching Elton last night it had seemed to him that the other man had chosen the lesser part. And he was still sorry for Elton, but he felt a certain contempt for him as well, for in these last few moments it had become plain to him, as he had sensed it once before, that Elton had chosen deliberately. The man had been afraid of life. Even in the old reckless student days he had never lived life to the full. Yet he had had ambition, he had even justified some of the promise of his youth. And to what had it all come?—a music master in a smug

mid-Western town, the husband of a Mrs. Elton. . . .

As for Elton himself, it seemed he even prided himself on the pitiful lack in his life that a woman had never lured him. To him all women were as his wife. He had told Biran she had been one of his "young ladies." And last night he had warned Biran that Elsa Colt was not "that kind of girl." What did he know of girls of any kind? or of happiness, or soul-wringing misery? His life, and the life of his neighbour,—one might toss them together, and could each tell his own from the other? Had he not acquired his very wife from the lottery of mere propinquity? Small wonder he mis-doubted Elsa Colt on the ground that she was a girl, a woman-creature. Why, the man had never known what it was to love a woman, had never known a woman's love.

He looked over at Elton, still busy sorting the music. Did Elton realize that the girl played better than he could now ever hope to play? Was it possible that the future did not sometimes appear barren before him, if sometimes he did not revolt at the untroubled prospect of the assured years divided into so many hours a day at so much an hour? Biran regarded him curiously. Here was a man who had deliberately turned his back on life, he summed it up to himself. Yet, after all, he did not know the details of Elton's life. Again he wondered if Elton knew just how badly he played. If there came to him moments when he paid heavily for the peace and content of his outward life. But watching him carefully sorting the neat piles of his musical scores, Biran repeated aloud, dismissing it, "There is not even a question between us." And Elton, looking up long enough to glance past Biran at the clock on

the mantelshelf, answered heartily, "Oh, I guess we all get just about what is coming to us in this world," and his eyes, as they noted the time, were already pre-occupied with another thought. Then he laughed. "Sometimes I wish my wife didn't have quite such a well-developed bump of punctuality. I feel it in my bones dinner will be ready before I can get this out of the way." His attention concentrated on the sorting of the music, and having put aside the scores he had chosen, he returned the music to its place on the shelves. "The wife insists on order in the house," he laughed again. He accepted one of Biran's cigarettes with the complacency of a man satisfied with a day's work well done, and let himself down into a large arm-chair, rather overdoing his enjoyment of well-earned leisure, it seemed to the other man's more tense attitude of body and mind. "I got a new pupil out of last night's performance."

"So—?"

They smoked in silence for a moment. "By the way, the mother mentioned they were 'at home' Wednesday evenings. I told her I'd do my best to get you to stay over. But it looks as if she'll have to thank the Colt girl, not me." His smile signified his willingness to continue an interesting topic. Biran merely flicked the ash from his cigarette, and said nothing. "Have you decided?—is it her eyes or her playing?"

Biran looked at the glowing tip of his cigarette, and his spoken words were apparently irrelevant so far as Elton's little joke was concerned. "A hitherto merely personal speculation on my part has recently evolved into a profound conviction. It is the surer way to ruin

and waste a life by doing nothing, than to venture it on a chance."

Then they went in to dinner, and Mrs. Elton.

Twice again Miss Colt accompanied her sister to the studio, then abruptly her chaperonage ceased. On the occasion of her first absence, the girl made some unintelligible excuse to bridge the awkward moment of arriving alone; while Biran murmured a polite rejoinder; the second time she merely looked her explanations; after that they did not speak of it again. The week passed. In the meantime, Biran had gone with the Eltons to Mrs. Wingate's "At Home," and had come away half-committed to do a bust in marble of Miss Wingate, the new pupil, and an only daughter, who was of a certain amiable prettiness, and very little else. If he accepted the commission, it would necessitate remaining some time longer than the week he had promised Elton. But as it happened, he had no immediate engagements elsewhere. . . .

The next day he kept Elsa Colt far past the hour, and after the lesson walked with her to the corner where she took her car. Waiting to cross the street, he had bought violets from a flower vender, and given them to her. The little half-mocking look was in his eyes again: once before she had tried to thank him; and he had rather brutally, if not unkindly, given her to understand that what he did he did for his own pleasure, because it pleased him to do it; so now she accepted the violets with a look of silent gratitude; but the following day she wore them to the studio, and the grateful look was still in her eyes. She played badly that day. She could not catch Biran's meaning, or

could not execute it. So presently he took the violin from her. He had never before played to Elsa. It was not often he cared to play; but sometimes the music came into his fingers. The shadows lengthened in the room; and in the corner of the divan where she had withdrawn herself Elsa remained motionless, seeming hardly to breathe, while her eyes never left Biran's face. Then, abruptly, and with a crashing chord that shattered the stillness of the room, he stopped playing. Elsa did not move. And Biran crossed the space between them and sat down by her on the divan. It may have been the shadowed room, or her dark dress, but she looked to him suddenly, strangely older. It seemed to him he could plainly see the woman foreshadowed in the girl-face; and she looked back at him with eyes deeper, darker, giving more than the girl-eyes had promised. He waited curiously for her first words, her first gesture, in which she would reveal herself. For all the time he had been playing, apparently forgetful of the girl's presence, Biran had meant that the music should creep into the silent places of her soul. While he waited, he took swift account of her. He had already noted that the dress she wore today was well suited to her slight, straight figure; and it suddenly occurred to him that if she were properly dressed . . .

Would she know how to dress properly? She wore her violets gracefully. . . .

But above all, although she still remained motionless, except for a slight quiver of the violets at her breast, Elsa seemed on the verge of waking into vivid consciousness. Biran leaned a little forward to look into her eyes, and the slight motion released her from the

thrall the music had put upon her. She moved uneasily, drew a short breath, met Biran's look with wide-eyed wonder; while she seemed still to be listening. To his ironical amusement Biran felt himself sorry for her, for her young innocence that must struggle out of its night of ignorance into knowledge. "Well?" he said at last.

She answered in a hushed whisper. "In another moment—in another moment—I would have known—" She looked up at him with her girl-eyes that questioned, that seemed to glimpse the answer, yet not to understand; and again Biran waited, with the consciousness of something coming to life before his eyes.

". . . It was like another world, while you played. And when you stopped, it was like trying to remember a beautiful place one had seen in a dream. When the music stopped—there were no words to tell about it." She ended a little breathlessly, panic-stricken at the sound of her own voice in the stillness of the big room. With returning self-consciousness, the wavering expression returned to her mouth; she made an indecisive movement to rise; in the space of a breath she was again the timid, anxious girl who daily greeted Biran with the same hesitating uncertainty, as if she waited to be rebuffed. And Biran, recognizing that the moment was past, quickly brought the lesson to an end. When she had gone, he shut out the grey winter day with a flood of light.

He was dining with the Wingates that night, and he had not yet come to a decision whether or no he would undertake the commission of putting Miss Wingate's blond nullity into marble. That this was not the point at issue was beside the question. In reality he did not

give Miss Wingate a thought. He was not even thinking of Elsa. The thought in his mind was, To what end? and the realization that he had taken to looking forward to the next day with a certain interest; while Miss Wingate's ambition to be "done" by the great sculptor hung in the balance. For some time Biran remained standing in the middle of the room, apparently simply enjoying his cigarette, and the warm cosiness, pretty and restful, of the studio, its conflicting decorative tendencies harmonized in the half-light. His glance was contemplative rather than thoughtful or uncertain. Once the thought of the elderly Miss Colt, who had not had her chance, intruded. And the girl could play, if she had it in her to learn the lessons that alone could teach her to play; else she must always remain like a blind person, groping in the dark, trying to express uncomprehended things. The girl felt it herself; she had tried to say it that afternoon; to give voice to the inarticulate something locked in her breast. And if she had become almost at once the raw schoolgirl again, yet something had come to life within her, if only for the passing moment; the instinct, the feeling, that there was much to know, much to feel, that life offered possibilities she had not, in her most daring dreams, dared even to imagine. Inevitably the thought came to Biran that if but vicariously, still he might come to feel a renewal of the vivid life of youth. . . .

The clock on the mantelshelf ticked evenly away towards the half-hour after five. Presently, Biran verified the time by his watch. . . . Should he take the train out of this hideous, bustling, overgrown town tomorrow? He returned the watch to his waistcoat pocket, deliberate in all his movements. Then he

came to his decision in a single brief phrase. Miss Wingate should have herself "done" in marble by the great Biran.

Elton's greeting when he found Biran smoking in the studio was spontaneous and hearty. There had been no more disquieting conversations, but the two had smoked many pipes of peace together. He clapped Biran on the shoulder. "I was going to look you up tonight anyhow. Now you are here we can spend a jolly evening with the wife and kiddies. The madam was asking about you this morning."

"Thanks. But I'm due to dine with the Wingates tonight."

In a woman, Elton's expression would have been called one of chagrin. He had given her first lesson to Miss Wingate that afternoon; but of course there was no reason why the Wingates should, on such slight acquaintance, ask any one to dine. . . . Of course with Biran it was different. His look cleared, and he laughed. "I thought of you this afternoon—what you said the other day about a woman being the perfect instrument, you know—while the young lady was putting her violin to the torture."

Biran asked, "Why do you not tell her she is wasting your time and her own?"

"My dear fellow, that may be the obvious thing to do from the artistic point of view, but it would be suicidal as a matter of bread and butter. Anyhow, you can't always tell how a pupil will turn out. The most promising are as often as not failures. There's Elsa Colt, for instance. Sounds promising enough; but more than once in these two years I've wanted to tell

her to give it up. And now here you come along, and say that all she wants is a chance. She may make a good teacher. Or it may all come to nothing with her."

"She'll never make a good teacher."

"Then why don't *you* tell *her* she's wasting her time? I don't mind if you advise her to stop lessons with me."

"You've taught her everything she can learn from you."

Elton laughed, a bit uncertainly. "Is it her limitation, or mine?" he asked, with a sudden glimmering of the other's meaning.

There was a perceptible silence, while Elton unconsciously squared his shoulders. "It's the life, man," Biran said. "That's what's the matter with the girl. She's drugged with it, she's asleep, she doesn't know she's alive."

At the end of the week Biran asked Elton to help him look out a studio. He wanted it away from the noise and narrow streets of the city. He would not listen to the advantages of the newest studio building; but he assured Elton he would not be hard to please; only he could not abide low ceilings; and he confessed to a horror of street cars passing his door; otherwise, anything from an abandoned farm to an attic would do very well,—so long as it was exactly what he wanted. But that was the one point on which he *was* particular. Elton, accepting it as the great man's prerogative to be somewhat opinionated, promptly hailed one of the tabooed street cars, and asked for transfers. For his own part, he did not want Biran too far away. He was moved, on the whole, by a feeling he could not have explained to his wife, who had that same morning carried away the sofa cushions to be re-covered and had

suggested a new rug for the studio. But this questing together with Biran took him back to the old days when he had shared all things with Biran, even Biran's philosophies, with certain reservations on Elton's part. He did not in the least agree with his friend's outlook on life, or art, or what a man wanted from life. In fact, he wholly disagreed with him. And he had settled it in his own mind to his own entire satisfaction that Biran's only valid argument was his success; which his explanations might not, after all, explain. In short, the sculptor had genius, artistic and social. As to his erratic ideas, Elton, along with the rest of the world, tolerated for the sake of his genius what needs would be condemned in a man of lesser parts. Perhaps, too, he realized that in the fleeting renewal of this friendship he was looking his last upon the page of his youth before it was finally turned. The whim that had brought Biran to the West would not repeat itself; while the lines of his, Elton's, life were definitely circumscribed within a circle he had no desire, no possibility, to escape. In a month or two, when Biran had gone, and they would come across his name in a paper or a magazine, he and his wife would recall these weeks the great man had been among them, and it would become the abiding memory of his friend, whom, face to face, he did not quite understand, nor quite approve; nor could he have said if it was Biran's idealism or his cynicism that most disquieted him. His wife had called Biran a disappointed man; perhaps on no better evidence than his state of single blessedness, and because he had once ingratiated his finger into the fisthold of her youngest; for himself, Elton thought Biran naturally a bit arrogant and self-sufficient over

his success; but no end of an artist, and a charming fellow, for all that. He did not know when he had enjoyed his pipe in such good company as these evenings when he smoked with Biran; it reminded him of days when they matched coins for the last bit of tobacco in the bottom of the jar. So perhaps he was thinking most of all of the evenings with Biran when he took transfers.

Biran signified with a nod that he put himself entirely in Elton's hands. For the rest, he looked about him with a certain degree of curious interest. And it suddenly flashed into his mind that the girl Elsa Colt would be at home in one of these drab, uniformly-faced houses. The girl had said little enough of her family or circumstances. Elton had been able to tell him but little more; but Biran's instinct instantly associated her with these rows of blank houses.

Watching his eye, Elton waved his hand in a large gesture. "Pretty average good-looking town," he nodded towards the houses on their side of the car.

"Very," Biran assented. He was thinking of the elderly sister of Elsa whose eyes had looked back at him with the same blank inexpressiveness of all these decently curtained windows that reflected nothing, either of the life within or of the passing world without.

And the girl?—

It was on the cards that the Lares and Penates of her hearth would not bestir themselves in her behalf. And so far as the girl herself was concerned it was plainly the intention of circumstance that she should live out her life in some one of these colourless houses, another Miss Colt perhaps; or it might be as a wife and a mother; while her violin, the same execrable

instrument she played now, would repose in its unopened case on the piano,—for he supposed there would be a piano for the little ones of the house who in their turn would perhaps inherit some of the mother's musical talent, or the tradition of it.

And so the world goes its way.

But Biran had not lived his life without coming to have faith in the God of Chance, stalking abroad in the world, eager to break a lance with Destiny itself. One had but to stand forth unafraid, to follow unquestioningly,—the price in one hand, the other hand open and ready to receive the gift of life. And no man could say for another what was the worth of life to him, or the price he could afford to pay. It so happened that to some the chance was wholly worth the price, even though it left them with empty hands; to have known the hazard, even to have lost, was recompense enough. And until life was over, no man could know fully the loss or the gain. Biran himself had won and lost, and won again only to lose, and lost in the winning, even as he had won in losing.

From contemplating the long streets of houses, Biran's look returned to Elton. Elton was reaching comfortable middle-age without a vital regret to tear like a living, quickening thing across his placid calm; not a remembrance he would not have shared with his wife or his good friend; not a mad hope, not even a memory of a mad desire, hoarded away within his secret heart to companion him for an hour. He looked at these soul-depressing houses, and they were to him a prideful measure of his town's prosperity. And Biran listened, while Elton gave him further information; he even asked a question or two, wondering at the other

man's air almost of proprietary pride and interest;—was it a sense of humour he lacked? Biran already knew how largely of his inheritance his friend had spent for bread alone, but he had not before realized that he had not left himself even a single piece of silver wherewith to buy lilies.

They arrived at last at the corner of their destination. It appeared Elton remembered having seen a likely-looking place for a studio hereabouts; ten minutes' walk along a grass-grown path led them to the broad, sliding doors of the building, apparently long unused,—a storage house for carriages—the owner, who lived conveniently near, told them; and the gentleman could take possession whenever he chose. Biran, never losing time in coming to a decision, said it would be at once, as soon as he could have another window or two put into the blank walls.—For a month's occupancy? Elton asked, when they were again on their way. And Biran answered it would be worth it for a day, were it worth while at all. Could Elton tell him where it was best to get draperies, and furniture? and when he had put his house in order, Elton must come often and smoke his pipe before his, Biran's hearth fire.

CHAPTER III

BALANCING on the top rung of the ladder, Biran reached down for more tacks to finish putting up a piece of tapestry that was to break the bareness of the board wall at the far end of the long room. With upturned face and outstretched arm, Elsa Colt held up the little box to him. Biran, however, made no motion to take it, while the girl waited with poised attention, as she had been waiting all the time Biran was busying himself with the tapestry, watching him from her place at the foot of the ladder. His extended hand was still beyond her reach; he would have to descend a rung, or she to go up one. . . .

The little pause lengthened.

"How many do you want?" Elsa held the box ready.

Biran was apparently content to discuss the matter with her. "There are two corners yet to fasten," he considered it, "and as my average of effectiveness is about one out of three—" He turned squarely about on the ladder, and stood looking down with a smile into her eyes; and slowly the anxiously serious expression of her face receded before his look, and she smiled back at him, first with her eyes, then her mouth smiled. She still continued to hold the box up to him, but Biran had thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat. Elsa shook the little box tentatively, then rested her hand on the ladder.

"Well, what do you think of it?"

She looked at Biran inquiringly. She did not always know just what he meant, he had such a startling way of asking her questions about apparently nothing at all, although she had learned that he always really meant something in particular, only she could never be quite sure just what it was.

Biran settled himself comfortably against the ladder. He saw the look of suspended animation come swiftly into the girl's eyes; and felt in his pockets for his cigarette case. "We've made rather a good job of it," he made a gesture around the big room. Elsa's eyes followed the wave of his hand. "It's wonderful." Then, for the first time in the fortnight Biran had known her, she volunteered a remark on her own account. "I used to think Mr. Elton's studio was lovely—"

She drew a long breath, half a sigh. Then she laughed, a funny little scared laugh that set Biran to smiling. "Rooms always make me feel I have to keep my elbows close to my sides; my own room at home has millions of things too many in it—only I didn't know before what was the matter with it—but I always knew something *was* the matter—"

They had been for the better part of a week now working together transforming the bare room into a possible working-place. Biran had chosen to make his new quarters livable for reasons that embraced the reason of his occupancy of it at all. Since the day he had asked her to come to the prospective studio a little earlier than the hour of her lesson, Elsa Colt had fetched and carried for him, and given his handiwork the unstinted admiration and approval of her eyes; but she had not for a single instant become a live human

being. Once or twice Biran had surprised her on the very verge, but she still maintained her silence.

Perched precariously on the top of the ladder, Biran blew slow puffs of smoke into the air. He appeared not to be looking at Elsa, but critically inspecting one of the corners of the room. Once before she had forgotten herself, the afternoon he had played to her; and now again she forgot her awe of Biran, in this unexpected ease of words. The somewhat apathetic droop of her figure, the slightly stolid expression of her face, disappeared with the restraint her silence had put upon her. But the girl was like a sensitive plant; a word, a glance, and she would retreat into herself.

Not quite lowering his glance to her face, Biran said: "To know that something is wrong—that's half the battle."

"I only—felt it; and that's different—from knowing." She looked doubtful, looked up at Biran thoughtfully. "And when people don't know—It's like my not knowing how bad my violin was until I had played on a good one. When one doesn't know—"

"Well, when one doesn't know—?" Biran was still looking over her head, leaving her unembarrassed by a direct look upon her.

"Oh—why, then one just goes on thinking everything is as it should be, because one doesn't know anything different. It's the knowing that makes a difference between the good and the bad of anything." Thought had at last broken through her impregnable silence. Biran brought his glance directly to hers. "Would you like—to know?"

She was half-daring, half-confused. In the end she said simply, "Yes." She had relinquished her hold on

the box of tacks, and stood a little away from the ladder. "I can play better now—than I could when you first heard me."

Whether or no she really could play better was beside the question. Biran had had no thought of making a musician of the girl in a week, or any number of weeks. He was not himself a master of the violin. But it was not his way to expend effort or waste time without purpose. He could not perhaps have said just when or how intention had crystallized into deliberate action. To his tremendous ennui he had undertaken the commission of Miss Wingate's bust in marble,—he always spoke of it to himself in that scoffing fashion,—and had rented the studio, and disposed himself therein for a prolonged sojourn. And now he knew the fortnight had not been spent in vain. But he must have realized it even before the dawning consciousness of it had come to the girl herself. It was as if some timid creature of the field had ventured for a breathless moment to the mouth of its burrow, and for the first time glimpsed the light of the outside world. He felt he must make no startling gesture, no sudden noise, lest it scurry back into the dark. But Elsa had, for the moment, said all she had to say. Descending the ladder presently, Biran upset the little box of tacks, and when she would have darted forward to gather them from the floor, he stopped her. "We've played enough today. Now for work. Did you get the best of that Sarasate?"

Late the next day the last tack had been put into the last corner of the tapestry that had been left dog-eared when Biran turned his back on it to get more

tacks, and had not returned to finish it. Today he and Elsa had worked steadily and without interruption of conversation. The big, barrack-like place was assuming an air of distinction. Biran whistled softly as he experimented with a marble plaque against different backgrounds. And once, looking around unexpectedly, he saw Elsa standing quite still, watching him. She had paused with a curtain rod partly inserted, the length of colourful stuff trailing about her, thrown over her arm; and catching his look on her she spoke without premeditation the thought that was in her mind. "That way it looks as ornamental as a cornerful of bric-à-brac."

Biran had experienced the moment of expectation several times before, when he had surprised an ardent light of appreciation in the girl's eyes, and listened to her hesitating words. He knew he had achieved his best results with her by a series of object-lessons; he had early understood that she had very little power of visualizing words; that her imagination had never been stimulated; and he knew that a person to be articulate must harbour in himself some idea more vivid than of the mere sound of the articulated word. Elsa was hardly aware of speaking the words that voiced her comprehension of the essential fact: "—As ornamental as a cornerful of bric-à-brac." It was just so that she saw the marble plaque in its austere solitude against the large spaces of the tapestry.

Biran stood back for a critical survey. "Have you ever heard of the theory of elimination?"

"—That means doing without things, doesn't it?" she hesitated.

"It means doing with—superbly;—because above all

it means doing away with the petty hundred makeshifts to make way for the two or three really great things. That includes all a man honestly wants or can happily enjoy. The sunshine of heaven, and love, and the work to which he gives his hand and heart . . . these are the rare and few treasures to adorn the bare everyday walls of a man's House, which is the space of his allotted years in this life." In the little silence, he came to a decision about the plaque. A single touch altered its position. "Anything else is junk. Best toss it out of the window."

So, presently, they hung the last curtain; the rugs on the floor were at last arranged to their satisfaction; and Biran and the girl stood together in the middle of the room, regarding their handiwork. Biran lighted a cigarette. "I think—we owe ourselves a holiday."

Elsa's glance was swiftly recalled from its lingering about the room. "Oh—so you don't want me tomorrow?"

"I was thinking—we are quite fine enough for a party."

Elsa made no answer. Looking straight down into her face Biran must have been aware of the conflicting emotions on her unschooled face. "I suppose—if one has a party—one has to ask—people, or it wouldn't be a party." Were she a little more daring, her words, as well as the look in her eyes, would have said, Must it be a party? "—Or it wouldn't be a party, of course," Biran echoed seriously.

Slowly her eyes acquiesced. But a sudden protest had winged through her glance, and Biran had read it. He continued planning the party. "We'll ask Mrs. Elton to chaperone us." And he concluded his list of

prospective guests with Mrs. and Miss Wingate. And again she accepted it as she accepted everything Biran said to her, silently, as though it were the last word. Then Biran asked her whom she would ask to the party. But Elsa shook her head. In that whole town, where she had lived all her life, she confessed there was no one she cared to ask. There was something pathetic in the little shake of her head. Biran felt suddenly poignantly sorry for her. For a moment it seemed to him he had never seen any one so utterly alone in the world as this girl with her silent mouth and speaking eyes. But he said merely, "You'll pour tea, of course."

Elsa's eyes widened. "Oh—I couldn't. I've never, in my life, poured tea at a party."

"Then we'll have to have a rehearsal, that's all. Where's the teapot? You'd have to make acquaintance with the teapot, in any event. It's such a very new teapot."

And over the brewing of the tea they decided on the following Saturday for the day of the party.

Elsa had a new frock for the party. But she had not managed the bouquet from the florist's, that Biran sent her for the occasion, as well as she deftly arranged flowers she bought on the street. She wore the hot-house violets self-consciously, just as she was not quite at ease in the new frock. But as he took her wrap from her, Biran thought he had not given her credit for being so girl-pretty as she was today. She was plainly excited at the prospect of the afternoon, although she was very quiet as always, except that there was a little tense note in her voice when she replied to his greeting. The sisters had come early, and Miss Colt was being

escorted around the studio. As the guest of her host, Miss Colt recognized the reciprocity of the obligation, and her manner was altered to suit the occasion. She had much more of a vocabulary than the younger sister; and she had once heard a very interesting lecture on the "Influence of Colour" upon one's daily life, by a man whom it appeared Mr. Biran knew very well. Also she had immediately recognized the subject of the marble frieze when Elsa brought her in silence to look upon it; which knowingness on her part led gracefully to mention of her host's work. Biran listened courteously. In her social capacity, Miss Colt was quite another person from the elderly sister of their first meeting. But she was less convincing; and Biran concluded that the world stood in no need of any more Miss Colts. They had not completed the round of the studio before he perceived that, whereas on the previous occasions when they had spoken together Elsa had, so to say, taken shelter behind her sister's elbow, she seemed now to stand at his side and watch her sister with the same eyes with which she had then watched him, the stranger to her. Later, stopping to speak with Elsa where she sat at the tea table, he noted with amusement her thoughtful preoccupation as she managed the tea service with unexpected ease. He asked for a cup of tea, and she poured it carefully, not forgetting the lemon, and gave it to him with a shy smile that had something of pride in it.

As the winter days shortened, Biran usually walked with Elsa to the street car. Several times he took the car in to town with her; and once they walked the distance to Elsa's own door. They had become so absorbed

in a discussion about lace curtains that when it occurred to them to take note of their surroundings they had come so far along the way that it seemed simpler to continue to walk. For the subject of lace curtains had proved a fruitful one. Elsa had said: "I always felt that lace curtains were hideous. Only I didn't know why I felt that way about them, when everybody has them." They were walking on one of the obviously prosperous streets of a middle-class quarter of the town, and Biran comprehended at once what was in the girl's mind. She spoke with unusual forcefulness, with deeper feeling than the subject seemed to warrant, while her glance swept the façade of a becurtained house.

Biran protested. "But lace curtains are eminently respectable, and—highly ornamental; and, I should judge, something of an institution, a sort of letters-patent to the outside world."

Elsa did not know what letters-patent were, but she did know how she felt about lace curtains. "I said—lace curtains—but I was really thinking—about all the other things that just naturally go—with lace curtains."

"What things?"

She made a little gesture towards the house they were passing. "Most of the things to which we are so accustomed that we never give them a thought."

"I never knew what I really thought—well, about lace curtains, until I said it aloud just now. But I think I can almost tell by the design what kind of people live behind them—the curtains, I mean."

"What kind of people?" Biran did not laugh. It was like teaching a small child to walk, to get the girl to venture into the realm of spoken thought. It was

not her way to voice her preferences or dislikes; what few of them she appeared to have Biran had had to find out for himself, to surprise her in them. He had wondered at his own patience, his wariness; but also he was aware of a certain interest; and today it looked as though he were going to receive at least an earnest of his reward. He turned and looked at Elsa. She was holding her head high, a bit stiffly, but it showed her profile to advantage, and Biran suddenly realized that the uncertain smile no longer hovered about her lips, and that her mouth had a definite, a very pretty, contour. She had long ago discarded the big hat with the ungraceful brim-line. Taking note of her harmonized appearance, Biran recalled his observation that with those eyes . . . Then he asked gravely, "What kind of people?"

She darted at him a suddenly mischievous look. "We have lace curtains at home," she said sedately. "Quite hideous ones, you know. And very—ornamental." Still Biran hardly dared to laugh. But it looked very much as if she were going to prove that Elton was wrong when he said her eyes were wasted. Then Biran allowed himself to smile; and Elsa smiled back at him. He did not give her time to regret her smile. "And now that you know lace curtains are hideous, what are you going to do about it?"

"I know what I'd like to do."

"Yes—?"

"I'd like to gather up all the ugly hideous things in the world and make a beautiful bonfire out of them."

Biran demurred. "Where'd you get your license to say what was fine and what was ugly?"

"You told me yourself." Biran waited. "You called

it some kind of theory. You said there were two or three real things in life that included all that was good and happy. So I'd only have to remember what they were, and all the rest would go into the bonfire."

Biran vaguely recalled the afternoon in the studio when he had had some difficulty in disposing the marble plaque to his satisfaction, but he tried in vain to recall the two or three things he had named as necessary to the good and happiness of life. "But you know, my dear girl, somebody else might choose quite differently." But he saw in the swift upward flash of her eyes that she, at least, accepted his choice as her own. She answered him simply, the words he had said, as beyond all argument. "You said—the sunshine of heaven, and love, and the work of one's hands." And Biran was relieved and glad, that he had said just those words, and no others. She was such a child, after all, and she must not be frightened by words she could not understand.

They had stopped at a street corner to let a motor pass and at the same moment they became aware that night had fallen, that the streets were lighted. Elsa looked about at a loss; the corner was unfamiliar; and they made their way quickly along the deserted sidewalk; everywhere the shades at the windows were drawn, the lace curtains hidden from sight; this sudden emptiness of the streets emphasized their companionship; they had never before felt so alone together; and when Biran parted from Elsa at her door she shyly held out her hand to him for good-night.

The weeks passed into a month since Biran had come West to see his old friend Elton. He had been a fortnight in his own studio; the bust of Miss Wingate stood

shrouded mysteriously in a corner; an hour or two went every day to his music, which he found he had sadly neglected; and there were the lessons with Elsa Colt. Then, for two days, Elsa did not come to the studio. And when on the third day she appeared at the usual hour, Biran did not speak the words he had opened his mouth to say. Violin in hand, she waited silently to begin the lesson. And Biran, at the piano, nodded immediately that he was ready. He was not a little amused, a little puzzled, by her unusual air of self-possession, the fact that she had attempted no explanation of her absence, her abrupt concentration on the business of the moment,—all new to her usual manner, her timid waiting upon his pleasure. The Concerto finished, he let her play alone. He sat regarding her closely. It was not her music. She could not yet hope to hold Biran's undivided attention by her music, as she held it now. He was not unaware of the difference these weeks had wrought in the girl, but at the moment he was thinking that she seemed to have grown taller in these two days he had not seen her. In the deepening shadows of the room, she appeared etherealized, more a creature of the senses than of flesh and blood. Yet she looked older somehow; not quite the same girl she had been a day or so ago; or was it her strange unself-consciousness as she stood there playing before him, apparently oblivious of his presence. She seemed suddenly to embody the fulfilment of promise, to realize something of her own latent potentialities; for the moment to have grown beyond the immature girl Biran knew her to be. He refrained from lighting a cigarette. He was not listening particularly to her playing, although he knew she was playing better than she always played. He watched

her through narrowed eyes, trying to discover what it was that marked the change in her . . . something that had come to pass in the two days she had not been at the studio. She had had to face a crisis, he decided; to come to a decision, perhaps. And she had suddenly and unexpectedly discovered a reserve force of strength within herself. One had to be driven into a corner, to make such a discovery, Biran well knew. His discerning eye told him that the girl had at least turned on the enemy, had made a stand for it, whatever it was that now made her hold her head a little higher, gave her that look of added inches. It told in her playing, as well. For every feeling she made experience yield her, her music would benefit tenfold. And like all the world, she would have to buy knowledge at the price of her ignorance. Far be it from him to question or judge the worth of the barter.

Presently, with hands clasped about his knees, Biran was leaning forward, listening.

He understood she was not ready to talk to him. When the lesson was over he let her go at once, and alone. But he had said, as he held the door open for her, "Come in time tomorrow to give me a cup of tea."

CHAPTER IV

SINCE the day of the party, Elsa had given Biran tea often enough to do it now without giving too close attention to distracting details. She managed the new teapot admirably; and she always remembered that Biran liked his tea poured over the one lump of sugar. She liked to preside at the tea table. Her awkwardness among the unaccustomed appointments had passed; and she felt a proprietary pride in the tea table that manifested itself in a sedate little air of hospitality; but only in this one corner of the studio; in the other three corners, in all the rest of the big room, she maintained her reserve of strange surroundings. The broad low couch with its cushions, inviting ease, remained *terra incognita* to her. Instead, she always chose one of the straight-backed chairs, or the piano stool. Biran had once remonstrated with her, complaining that it gave her a look of temporariness, perching about like that; yet if she no longer said as soon as the lesson was over that she must be going, she still sat on the straight-backed chairs.

Today, facing her across the tea table, Biran asked abruptly, "Why did you stay away those two days?"

Elsa put down her cup with a little clatter against the saucer. Biran would not help her. She had to answer. "But I did come. I'm here today." It was not very coherent. There was a touch almost of defiance in her voice; and as her glance reluctantly obeyed the compulsion of his, Biran understood from her eyes that

the something that had come to pass in the two days of her absence had to do with her coming to the studio. "I am—always coming," she confirmed his silent conclusion. And she did come, regularly, after that, every day. But until she was ready to make her confidences, Biran would wait. It was enough for him that she could be roused, that she showed spirit. He cared nothing at all for the details of her life; and then one day when they were speaking of her playing, in a tentative way of her future, Elsa confronted Biran with the amazing tale of a suitor asking her hand in marriage. He looked back at her in sheer amazement.—So that was what the elderly sister had had in mind when she spoke of the girl's talent as an "accomplishment,"—Biran pursued the term to its last analysis; while Elsa remained silent, crumbling a bit of cake. Evidently she did not share her sister's view of the case. She had spoken of the suitor not as though he solved her problem for her, but as though he were the problem. She had confessed him to Biran with the self-justification that he was a friend of her father's. After all, there was nothing so strange in the mere fact; but for a moment Biran could not quite grasp the notion of Elsa with a suitor. A suitor who left her unmoved, it is true; but still, an eligible suitor.—It came to this: the girl was under no necessity of looking to her musical talent to provide for her future, or even to occupy her time while she waited, having, it appeared, no need to wait. Under the circumstances, she was plainly wasting her time. As an "accomplishment," she already played quite well enough.

Biran turned it over in his mind. For all that he had no concern with the suitor as a suitor, he *was* concerned

with him as a circumstance. As an intruder into a situation for which Biran had been prepared to hold himself responsible, the man had to be reckoned with. For the situation Biran contemplated was one in which the girl's music held first place, if through it Elsa herself was also to come into her own. "What does he think of your fiddling?"

"He likes me to play."

"What will he say to your coming to New York to learn to play even better?—for a year, let us say."

"To—New York?" Elsa sat suddenly upright, a little away from the table, and her hands were still on the cloth. "New York?" Her eyes repeated her startled words.

"I shall have to be returning some day soon now, you know."

She continued looking at him while Biran leaned to her. "Are you going to drop back, just drift, arrive nowhere, or was your talent given to you for something?"

"I—can't go to New York."

"It will do you no good to study with Elton."

"No."

"Well?"

She had nothing to answer, nothing to say. She sat there very quietly, looking at Biran. After a long moment, she gave him her answer. "What—can I do—but just drift?"

Biran spoke few words, but his eyes did not leave hers for an instant. He meant that she should understand all that was at stake, all she had to throw away, all she had a right to expect from life. He put it to

her simply, giving her the two and two of it, leaving her to make it four, or nothing. "You have—talent. If you are not afraid, or weak, or a natural-born drifter, you will make the world listen to you some day. But you can't do it by sitting back and twirling your thumbs. You'll have to learn, to know, what the world is thinking and feeling, before you can hope to speak to it. And you can't—just drift—into knowledge and real feeling and understanding. I don't mean that everybody has to go to New York, for instance, to learn these things. But *you* can't stay here and learn them. A handful of persons in an age are born knowing them, a few more can come to know something of it all—even a great deal—within the confines of their own little garden-patch of existence; but the vast majority never know; also, a few can learn. But only life itself can teach you anything about life. It isn't an easy lesson ever; and it is best and most poignantly learned when one is young. You will not be twenty-two always. And I give it to you for what my judgment is worth—you have at least an even chance to make a career for yourself. You must at least consider what you renounce before you cast it from you."

"But New York—I couldn't—"

"Why not?"

"They wouldn't let me—"

"And if they let you—?"

Her hands dropped away from the table. "They won't."

"Then—will you come, anyhow?"

While he still held her look, Biran saw the raw school-girl come to death in her eyes. Then she said, "I will ask my father—to let me go."

At least she did not lack courage, was Biran's comment to himself, when the next day Elsa told him she had spoken to her father, and it was as she knew it must be, he would not even discuss it with her. She remained very straight and still by the piano, waiting; and Biran knew she waited, shrinking, waited for the question he had asked her yesterday: would she go, anyhow? He saw she did not know herself what her answer would be. While she stood waiting, Biran changed a string on his violin, tuned it, held it to his ear, tested the string . . . all the time she waited. She was saying to herself that if Biran accepted her father's refusal to let her go to New York, then this was the end. She would not come to the studio again. . . . But something in her eyes still waited.

Biran placed the violin in position, played a phrase, touched the new string again. He did not need to look at the girl to read her. He had only to ask his question, and her answer would come to birth in the same instant. And for the second time, but now because he was sure of her, Biran did not leave the decision in Elsa's hands. Aloud he merely said, "So?" apparently accepting both her father's and her own refusal. He indicated he was ready to begin the lesson. Like a person unable to assert his will while fully conscious of the futility of his actions, Elsa played on and on, because Biran's eyes bade her to play. Yet if this were the end, why should she stay here now, if this were the end. But when at last he let her go, and she hurriedly put on her hat, she still lingered, again waiting for she knew not what. . . . Swiftly, fleeting, her glance embraced the studio . . . if she was not to see it again. Then without a word spoken between them, Biran had opened the door

for her, and she went quickly out of the room. If she was not to see him again . . . some instinct constrained her to keep her eyes hidden from him.

Long after Elsa had disappeared into the distance of the street, Biran remained at the door looking after her. . . . Should she live through the allotted span of her years, purposeless, barren, another bit of human driftwood, stifling the true fire of her life with sham snatches of activity and empty pleasures? The thought ran through his mind, "I'll teach her every hope and despair and exultation and heartache, every illusion and disappointment and joy, the human heart can feel, and know. She shall dream beautiful dreams, and waken to reality. She shall know for herself the happiness and sorrow that pass by others. She shall know more fully, feel more deeply and strongly, ascend to higher heights of bliss, know deeper depths of woe, than is the lot of her fellows; and so will she come into the real heritage of her life. She shall know reality, nor be content with its shadow." To the last iota, she should meet the obligation her genius laid upon her. And because she was doubly gifted, because she had a soul and a heart and a mind, as well as the gift of music, she must be more, vastly more than the merely clever artist that sufficed the ambition and aspiration of lesser talent, before she could become the supreme artist he meant her to be. In a world doomed to dumbness, this girl possessed the power of expression. And it was he, Biran, who would put into her heart and hands the key of knowledge that would open every door of life to her. He would put life into her heart and veins, quicken life in her dreaming eyes, give her pure gold of happiness, and warmth and tenderness of love . . . and then, be-

cause happiness and the joy of love were the less fruitful experiences of life . . . she should come to know the black night of despair; and all this she would weave into beautiful music. She must feel with her own heart every heartbeat of humanity, if the world was to heed her voice when she spoke to it. Mere lip-talk would not suffice to make the world pause and listen. Pitifully weak and ignorant as is every man in his isolation, the world of men is invincible and all-comprehending; and he who would speak to it must have felt all the winds from every corner of the world pass through his heart. . . . And the girl Elsa should know it all, all the man and the artist could teach her, all she had it in her to learn, with her woman's heart and body, and the soul of her.

The following morning Biran went to see Elsa's father in his office. They had not met before, but Mr. Colt must at least have known the artist's name since the conversation with his daughter. If he was surprised to see Biran, he was, at the moment, at leisure, and it would be just as well to nip at its source Elsa's mad idea of going to New York. He greeted Biran with tempered politeness; perhaps even a little condescendingly, Biran noted it with amusement, while he measured glances with him.—There was one and only one avenue of approach. After all, to be a famous and successful musician was as good a business proposition as any other, if one could carry it through. And Biran could assure Elsa's father that in the case of Elsa the venture was scarcely a venture at all, but practically a certainty of success. Moreover, his own fame and undoubted success as an artist loomed convincingly in the back-

ground. He could speak with authority in terms Mr. Colt could understand. Therefore the interview was brief, but at parting the two men shook hands; and on his way back to the studio Biran stopped at Mrs. Wingate's. Would Miss Wingate give him the sittings necessary to finish the bust during the next few days? as he was returning to New York within the next week.

The evening before his departure, he smoked his last pipe with Elton. To his own ironic amusement, he found himself hesitating to tell Elton that Elsa Colt was going to have her chance. Perhaps he was even a bit self-conscious before the simple statement that yet was fraught with such far-reaching suppositions. It was as though he felt a sudden protectiveness over the girl; for had he not made himself responsible for her, body and soul, when he undertook deliberately to waken her to reality, to give her the gift of life . . . ? Following a little silence, it was the music master who put into words what Biran, strangely enough, found difficult to express.

"I hear Elsa Colt is going to New York to study."

Biran answered, "She has lost too much time as it is."

It was plain to see in Elton's expression, in his air of exaggerated nonchalance, that he was bringing himself to the point of uttering something that had been in his mind a long time. He was still uncertain whether to say it at all, or just how to say it. As to Biran, he could not see that it was any concern of Elton's, one way or another; Elton, whose smug rule of getting ahead, took so little account of the wonderful and

devious ways of life. But on the whole he was not averse to discussing it with Elton. He might very well have confessed to a slight elation. It was not every day that a situation of such hopeful ramifications presented itself to his fertile imagination. He had that afternoon seen the girl for the last time until he would meet her in New York; and he had no misgivings. He smoked quietly, with conscious pleasure.

Elton tried again. "It's none of my business, of course," he waved his hand largely, "but she'll fall in love with you, or has already. That's nothing to you, but it will ruin her life. She amuses you now, but you know it is not your way to stay amused, Biran."

"My dear Elton, you seem to forget that my sole concern with Elsa Colt lies in her promise to become one of the real artists of her day. My first instinct is always to create; and the girl is promising material. The human soul ought to be more malleable than clay."

"And the girl herself?"

"You are determined to draw the line between a woman and her soul, are you?"

Elton refilled his pipe. "A woman isn't like a man, to work her best and hardest against odds."

"And you are convinced the girl will be miserable." Biran straightened in the long chair. "Very well then, she'll be miserable. What does it amount to, after all, the happiness of an insignificant individual? I can't stand by and see the world lose what this girl has to give it, just to save her peace of mind. I know what you mean. But I can't help it that only love can rouse a woman to her fullest powers. And, by Heaven, that girl is not going to be doomed to mediocrity and a death-in-life existence just because a few vulgar conventions may

be shocked. If she has it in her to be something, somebody, she shall have her chance. What profit she makes of it, I am ready to hazard for her. She'll suffer, no doubt about it. But God! how she will play." He rose, and stood towering above Elton. "And that's the only thing that matters."

CHAPTER V

IN deference to the family prejudice, Elsa made the journey across the continent alone.

Biran met her at the station on her arrival in New York, and drove with her to the lodgings he had secured for her, saw that her trunk was promptly delivered, and left her to herself until the following day. And when the next day she opened the door of her sitting room to his knock, and saw him standing there, he knew she had been watching for him from the window. She held the door open without a word, and closed it on his entrance. In the new surroundings, still bewildered by the crowding impressions of her journey, she was again the awkward girl of the first days of their acquaintance. Biran greeted her with both her hands in his, and presently she responded to his smile. "You have left the sunshine behind you," he made light of the gloomy day, the grey skies, that gave the room a look of twilight in the morning. Elsa, suddenly realizing the responsibilities of hospitality, timidly offered her visitor a chair. But Biran had a plan of his own; Miss Elsa was to put on her things and come out to luncheon with him. Fortunately, there were no traces of tears on her face or in her eyes; but he had long ago made sure that Elsa would not resort to tears. It was natural enough that she should be a little unhappy; were it not just a bit pathetic, her flaunting youngness would have been absurd in a young woman of her years. It made him feel he was playing guardian to a very young child, when

Elsa went meekly to get her hat. So, in a word, their old relation was adjusted to the new situation.

Coming out into the street, Elsa shivered in the chilling wind. She had no furs; and her skirts whipped about her ankles, exposing them to the damp cold. Biran had already seen that she was inadequately dressed; and he tucked her hand into his arm, and for a moment warmed her fingers in his gloved hand. Under the stimulus of his presence, and the brisk pace of their walk, the tiny flame of Elsa's spirit revived. She was silent now from the very excess of her emotions; the kaleidoscope of the street held her marvelling gaze; her hand clung more tightly to Biran's arm. She was like a small child at the circus, Biran smiled to himself. As the hour advanced, and lovely ladies in motors flashed past them, he became aware of something different in the quality of the girl's absorption in the spectacle. There was a subtle, newly comprehending attention in her eyes. It was no longer the merely visual absorption of crowding physical facts, of new realizations, of sensations experienced for the first time. And when her companion bowed to one of the ladies in the passing pageant, Elsa withdrew her hand from his arm; instinctively it touched her hat, made a futile little movement of arranging it. Then she turned and looked at Biran with eyes in which all the impressions of the hour were concentrated. "It's just as if the illustrations in some wonderful book had all come true, come to life. I couldn't believe people ever really looked like that."

Biran laughed. "My dear girl, we're all of us fit subjects to illustrate some book."

Her glance returned to the street. "I knew of course *you* looked different from the men at home, but

then you *were* different. But here there seems to be so many of you—”

“It’s just that here they turn us out of the shops by the gross.”

Elsa was not convinced. “It isn’t that kind of look. A girl like me couldn’t go into a shop and come out looking like your friend, the lady you just spoke to.”

“It’s done every day,” Biran assured her.

She shook her head. “It isn’t only the clothes.”

“What is it, then?”

“I don’t know. But it’s there. I see it, if I can’t say what it is. I haven’t it. No. It isn’t only the clothes. That girl who just passed us had it.”

“Would you like to know wherein lies the inspiration—for a woman?”

Her eyes questioned.

“Sometimes it’s a man, sometimes it’s another woman, sometimes it’s just seeing enough things together at the same time to choose the right one. It’s that way all through life. The thing you call *It* is the way we hold our heads when we know we’ve chosen the right thing, whether it’s something to wear, or to be.”

Elsa did not respond at once. She was looking surreptitiously into the shop windows they passed, and at her own reflection in them; without premeditation, her lurking thought sprang into words. “I’d like to choose a hat—that is more right than this one.” She cast her eyes up at the brim of her hat, then at Biran, shy yet daring, with the boldness of her idea. Biran did not discomfit her by a direct glance; instead he looked at his watch. “Very well. We’ll lunch, and then we’ll go shopping.”

“Can’t we go shopping—first?”

"Aren't you hungry?"

"I think—I'd enjoy luncheon more—if I had a new hat."

"Thus is all the magnificence of this our magnificent city summed up in a hat!"

Elsa blushed furiously.

"Bless you, my child. I'm glad enough to see you take an interest in hats."

To Biran's amusement, Elsa displayed an unexpected mind of her own, in this matter of a hat. Her first question was for the price. But the saleswoman, experienced and clever, looked first at Biran, and murmured a reassuring figure to the girl. Elsa's eyes widened, but she instantly decided against the hat with a firmness that all the milliner's persuasion could not alter. The woman disappeared for a moment to return with more hats, all quite as pretty as the one Elsa had denied herself, and all, on enquiry, proving to be within her means. The choice narrowed to two; and to Biran's experienced taste Elsa chose the right hat. Standing before the mirror, with heightened colour, she read approval in his eyes. Yet later, watching her across the luncheon table, Biran had a sudden misgiving born of her receptivity.—It was not so much her silence. The consciousness of the becoming hat still shone subdued but triumphant in her eyes, instilled just a suggestion of assurance into her bearing, rendered her silence less barren than it otherwise must have appeared. They lunched at a restaurant where there was sufficient glitter and glamour to have elated a more sophisticated experience than Elsa Colt's; but Biran looked in vain for an inner, answering responsiveness. What if, after all, hers was simply the fatal faculty of receiving endlessly, impres-

sion upon impression, thought and feeling and emotion disappearing into the bottomless pit of her inexpressive silence . . . that she accepted all things, mirrored back every sensation, without question. Only once, when a woman after whom all eyes followed made her graceful and leisurely way to a far table, and Biran named the name of a celebrity Elsa had often seen pictured in the magazines, she turned in her chair. Biran said, "Some day people will be turning their heads to look at you like that."

To himself, while he smiled at her, he was thinking she was the only girl-woman he knew who knew how to blush. From the girl's warm cheeks his eyes went to the faces of the women at neighbouring tables. Many of them he knew; a few of them he knew very well.—And here he was, lunching with a badly dressed, silent girl, who gazed at all these brilliant personages without an idea that they might envy her, her charm of youth and freshness and unsophistication; that the glances he now and then intercepted, and smiled a little in baffling, asked plainly, Who is she? It was one of Theodore Biran's well known *bon mots* that to be clever one must of necessity be a little wicked, at least in performance, if not in actual intention. A bad man could appreciate goodness, whereas a good man could only turn away from badness. And there was a piquancy of contrast in this situation that certainly did not escape the knowing glances of all these lovely ladies who,—he would have explained them to Elsa had she so much as raised her eyebrows at the abundance of marvellous red-gold hair,—were not really wicked, but were simply interesting with the possibilities of wickedness; or had been; or were trying to become so. He could have told her that two or

three of the radiant creatures had, in their own way, also loathed lace curtains, and that he had been witness of more than one magnificent conflagration, from which they had come forth naked of all conventual vesture, to brave the accusing eyes of the curious and timid who pass judgments upon their fellow-man. Unfortunately denied other gift of expression save red-gold hair and speaking eyes, they remained undefended to the world that accused them. To Biran's estimation, no woman lived who was so virtuous or so chaste whose virtue and chastity were not primarily of tradition. He had said to Elton, Paris or Timbuctoo, it is all the same; and he thought none the less of women for that; in his experience, some of the worst had redeemed human souls sunk even deeper in the mire than themselves; and he had known a good woman who had sent the best of men to the devil. At best, values were conflicting. What was one man's food might well be another's poison. Who could say? To deny oneself food for fear of poison, were it not as well to risk the poison rather than to suffer the slow death of the starved? Elton, of course, would have resented the presence here, of the girl Elsa. But it was innocuous enough, this atmosphere of red-gold hair and shadowed eyes. It was, after all, nothing other than a clearing-house for personalities, such as is life itself; nothing more or less; the women came here to be seen, and the men to see; it was one of the byways of life; and one lingered here or not, just as one chose; only one must know it for what it was, before one decided for or against it; from Elsa, whose greatest asset was her wide-eyed innocence that was to buy her all knowledge, Biran looked across the room at the loveliest of the lovely ladies, all-powerful by

virtue of her knowledge of all things. A long road lay between; who could say whither it led?

Biran came for Elsa every day. For this first week, he told her, she was to forget that such a thing as a violin existed in the world. The long hours they spent together he likened to himself as a return to kindergarten days, of coloured worsteds, and the almost unbelievable joy of having a cardful of holes and a really-truly needle, to do with just as one pleased, daringly, wonderfully, master of one's own dearest and wildest visions of creation; long hours spent in the streets, or in beautiful shops, or listening to wonderful music; while the windows of the girl's eyes and soul opened ever wider to the tides of life breaking all around her. Gradually, Elsa learned to have preferences; and, to Biran's reassurance, presently began to express them. She had a natural instinct for the happy and beautiful things of life. In just these few days, too, she had learned to laugh. It was as though she were slowly thawing before a warming fire. Detached from surroundings that had tinged the very look of her with their drab and dinginess, every day she appeared more colourful. And looking into her face, with its changing expressions, at the eloquently silent mouth, the speaking eyes, Biran gave rein to his facile fancy and likened what he saw to the unfolding of a flower in the sun. He looked at her with a new interest, the interest of a man in a woman. And for a moment he dwelt on the thought that if happiness rendered a woman beautiful . . . beauty and happiness rendered a woman desirable. But he was not concerned with Elsa Colt as a woman desirable to man. He had a theory he wanted to prove, that he wanted her to

prove. There were women desirable a-plenty in the world; but this girl, if she was to fulfil her destiny, must be a woman to other ends than to be beautiful and desired of men. He curbed his thought abruptly. He was annoyed with himself. He had all but fallen into the attitude of a cavalier taking the sunshine with his lady. Whereas the business in hand was of far other import. The girl had been twittering like a bird in a cherry tree quite long enough. Moreover, even the free creatures of the air came to know there were not always cherries, nor yet sheltering leaves, on the trees. And to discipline his own wayward fancy, Biran resorted to stern measures. One did not think of blossoming trees and the birds of spring, in State Street. In State Street one saw the living of life in its grim reality; touched elbows with all that was ugly and coarse and brutal in the mind and body of man; here where there were no decent pretences to disguise the raw facts of existence; where brute instinct, the maintaining of life in their bodies, was the impelling force; with only fear and misery and primal human passions to shape their bodies and give expression to their faces; swarming humanity lived out its life. And Biran said to Elsa, shrinking by his side, that always, just around the corner, there is a State Street. He recognized her repugnance, her distress, but he would not turn back; and presently she raised her eyes, looked about her, cautiously, a little fearfully. She knew as little of physical ugliness as she had experienced the beautiful and fruitful emotions of body and spirit. Yet once, when Biran would have passed on, Elsa stopped him, and gave money to a woman who whined at their heels, more like some hungry animal than a human being; she dropped the coin at arms' length

into the dirty, claw-like hand, and turned quickly away from the woman's leer and snarled thanks. "I didn't know such a dreadful thing could be in the world." She was a little breathless.

"It's life, my dear girl."

"Then I don't want to know any more about life."

"Did I not tell you you had not laughed enough, nor cried enough?"

Elsa shivered. "I'll never forget that woman."

"No. One never forgets the persons or things that have made one feel. No—I think it will be better if you do not forget her.

"Some day, to have seen that woman, because you have suffered from her degradation, will add a needed note to your playing. You are eternally indebted to her for that. The coin you gave her is nothing compared to what she gave you."

Elsa spoke slowly. "If some day I was playing, and suddenly remembered that woman, I'd never be able to play it again, what I was playing. It would be too horrible—to remember."

"You will play all the better—"

She shook her head. "I couldn't play at all."

"On the contrary, that poor creature's image will come to stand before you, and you will look into her eyes, and your music will say what your soul sees in them: and what you'll see dead in her soul will help you to understand what may be just budding into life in your own. Who can say? Perhaps the very things that have degraded that woman, somewhere, somehow, were rendered fruitful of something beautiful and good to make other lives better and finer."

By the simple expedient of fixing his eyes on her

face he made Elsa look at him. Had she the divine power to feel intensely? was it the human, sympathetic soul of her; or the artificial, worldly sensibilities that made her avert her glance from the woman of the street? Her eyes would tell him. Deliberately, as he might have tested the strings of his violin, he made her look at him. "You didn't think that was the whole of life you saw the other day at Riccardi's, did you? Riccardi's is only a halfway house, as it were. You have heard the elevator boy calling, 'Going up, going down'? Well, Riccardi's is like that. Persons stop at Riccardi's for the moment before going up or going down. For the matter of that, Fifth Avenue and State Street are brothers under the skin. And perhaps it isn't a compliment to either." He was cruel, because it is not easy to look into hurt young eyes. His smile and eyes were both ironical now. After all, the hurt lay not in experience, but the use one made of experience. But the girl's eyes revealed less to him than they were wont to reveal. There lurked in her look a reserve he could not fathom. But he knew that beyond a certain point of intense consciousness, lay expression. "Are you afraid?" he asked. It was as though a blight had passed over her dawning brightness. And when presently he left her at her door, the light had not come back into her face; it was as if she had re-entered her house and drawn the blinds.

The following afternoon they had tea in a homely, secluded tea room, where only the distant hum of its passing drifted in to them from the traffic of the street. Biran had an almost uncanny intuition of the essentials of environment, physical and spiritual. Elsa had been

rudely disturbed the day before; but now, by the simple act of waiting for her to pour his tea for him, he put her at ease with her world again. For the moment he too found it pleasant dallying over their tea. They went more than once to the quiet tea room. But, after all, he had not brought her across the continent just to drink tea with Elsa. The day he asked her if she would like to go up to his studio, he felt decisive action lay in the suggestion. She was shyly eager; perhaps she had wondered a little why he had not asked her before; she had been in New York a fortnight now, in daily companionship with Biran, but always in strange places. Had she known it, she was a bit weary, weary in body and spirit. In her heart of hearts, she felt more strange with Biran than she had felt when they were strangers. She so often did not understand what he said to her, and yet, new meanings came to her with almost every word he spoke. The studio suggested rest to her. The thought of it was like coming to the end of a long journey that had been interesting but fatiguing; she knew she was tired of looking out of coach windows, as it were; the passing panorama blurred a little before her eyes. She even hurried their steps along the street. . . .

The imposing entrance of the studio building soon enough became familiar to Elsa, but she never lost the sense of quickening anticipation as she neared the threshold of the Enchanted Land. Biran had laughed at her; but to Elsa the studio remained the Enchanted Land. There were occasions when the murmur of voices brought dismay to her face, halting her eager steps as she stood outside the door; but one day Biran had found

her so; and it was easier for her to face what lay beyond the velvet curtains than to endure his slightest displeasure. She had felt the heavy draperies fall to behind her, and knew herself among people, many people. Then the ripple of talk flowed on again, and without knowing how it had come about, she found herself with a cup in her hand, and accepting a sandwich, while the lovely lady she had seen lunching at Riccardi's talked to her, smiled at her with wonderful eyes. She, Elsa, had never had a friend until Biran had made her his friend; and these were his friends, people out of another world; this beautiful lady was his friend, with her slow, smouldering smile, her wonderful clothes, her beautiful hands. Of course, had she ever given it a thought Elsa must have known that Biran had other friends, many friends. . . .

Silent and unsmiling, she sat very quiet in her corner of the divan. Miss Noreen, when she rose to go, murmured to Biran that the girl was like a little grey squirrel perched on the branches of a tree above the feast spread on the green grass below. "Bring her to see me," she added on a sudden impulse. "I had forgotten such wide-eyed youth existed in the world." But her eyes said she would never quite forget when she too had been young as this girl was young. "A thousand pities it must be fed into the ravenous maw of the world."

Biran returned her look, smiling a little. Was it a note of warning in the voice of this loveliest of ladies, who had the world at her feet? For a moment he did the beautiful lady an injustice in his thoughts; but he knew it was an injustice. He had not known Noreen in the days of which the memory still lingered in her eyes

as she turned away from Elsa; but they had been friends for a long time now; and it was in these later years since he had known her that Noreen had come into her own. They had long since learned to read each other aright. Biran had even ceased to wonder why he had never loved the charming actress. His slightly ironical smile found instant response in her slightly ironical eyes; and that was all. So they met, and so parted. If now and again a word would flash between them, they went their ways with a pulse quickened by the knowledge that the steel of each was still tempered to strike a spark from that of the other. And if Biran knew it was not the *métier* of Miss Noreen to be the friend of women, he had meant that she should be a friend to the girl Elsa.—It was a way the details of life had with Biran, of accomplishing themselves in his behalf without effort on his part. Thus it was Noreen who had seemed this afternoon to bespeak his, Biran's, good will, for the girl, while offering her own.

As for Elsa, she had not known how to leave, so she had remained until all of Biran's guests had gone. Returning into the room, Biran found her standing by the divan, tentative, as if she too were going. But he ignored her intention, made himself comfortable in a large chair. "Did you like Miss Noreen?"

"She's—very beautiful."

His eyes fixed on the girl's face, Biran thought he saw something there he had not seen before. "She makes people think she is,—that's the secret of Noreen's beauty." Would this girl know how to make use of her beauty, if it were beauty. . . ? "Noreen is a wonderful woman—" Noreen who was at least ten years past her youth.

Elsa spoke slowly, her eyes at last meeting Biran's. "When I was a little girl I used to think that if I could be beautiful I would always be very good and very happy. But Miss Noreen—isn't very happy, is she?"

"Why do you think that?" Somehow it had never before occurred to him that in Noreen's world one might feel the absence of happiness,—there were so many other things. "Why do you think Miss Noreen is not happy?" Was any woman ever happy after the first alluring youth had fled from her face, and the warmth of young hope from her heart?

"They were talking about somebody they called Mimi, and Miss Noreen said it wasn't her fault, because Mimi had been born too pretty, and any gift of the gods that set her apart from mediocrity was a curse to a woman." She was repeating the words exactly as she had heard them. "She said if she had it to do over again—her life—she would choose a cottage and babies, and that Mimi's misfortune was that she wasn't good enough to be happy, and too pretty to be good—" She did not understand it all, but she was trying to understand, her eyes on Biran's face, seeking light.

Biran, carefully rolling a cigarette between finger and thumb, said nothing.

"She—Miss Noreen—asked me what I was doing here, if I was alone in New York—"

"Yes?"

"She said—you had not told her—about me—"

"No."

"But she remembered seeing me with you, that day at the restaurant; and I told her I was going to study—"

Again Biran said merely, "Yes."

Then she made her plea timidly. "Could I begin soon—to study?"

Biran lighted his cigarette. "So you do not want to go back?" He laughed at the quick flash of her denial. "I thought perhaps Miss Noreen had frightened you with her tale of the bad and beautiful Mimi."

Elsa met it seriously. "But, you see, I'm not beautiful."

His eyes on her face, Biran did not answer her at once. No, she was not beautiful. But looking at Elsa he recalled that other women looked as though a hot wind had scorched their bloom. But she was not even pretty; was it only the subtle, suggestive, maddening allure of youth . . . ? When that faint flush grew pallid in her cheek . . . would her eyes have the look of these other women with their youth already greying in their faces?

"How about the cottage and babies?"

To his surprise, Elsa understood him at once. "I—could have stayed at home."

So, at all events, it was too late for her to go back.

Biran threw away his cigarette. "Are you tired of playing,"—he did not add "with me,"—"that you want to get to work?"

She flushed slightly. "I can't—thank you," she began, and went dumb. But she had again understood.

"Don't try. I'll have my thanks when you learn to play as I think you will learn—to play."

"Oh—I'll work," she promised eagerly.

And Biran, holding the new long coat that enfolded

her slenderness in its enhancing folds, said, "You must not forget to live, you know."

"I want—to live."

He stood looking down into her eyes, his hands firm on her slender shoulders. "So you shall," he promised, in his turn.

CHAPTER VI

IT came about quite naturally that Biran and Elsa should have tea together every afternoon at the studio. And when they were alone Biran dismissed his man and Elsa made the tea, sitting sedately at the tea table, while Biran tossed the cushions into a silken heap on the wide couch and ensconced himself in comfort. Long silences fell between them; they had not many topics of conversation in common; and the artist was often thoughtful, deliberately holding the situation at a standstill. He knew full well that once he had set the forces of destiny in motion, they would sweep relentlessly onward. That his reluctance, in its last analysis, scarcely did him credit, he likewise knew. But the girl's future as an artist was assured, her destiny as a woman inevitable. But he had shared the triumph of so many careers, known so many women. . . . If he still refrained from any word or deed, it was not to spare this girl to whom he had undertaken to play Providence. But—the colder and more bleak it was without, with rain and the slush of snow, the warmer and more friendly it seemed within. . . . And if Elsa's first awe of the luxurious studio had long passed, she still, as in other days, chose to sit in the straight-backed chairs.

Biran did not have to speak; the unlighted cigarette in his hand was eloquent of little understanding intimacies between them. Elsa rose at once. His match box lay on the tea table where he had left it after light-

ing the spirit lamp; and standing before Biran she lighted a match, remained holding it, while the little flame wavered, brightened, burned steadily; and still he did not hold up his cigarette. Then the flame flickered again, waned, died down close to her fingers. Slowly the colour mounted into her cheeks, warmed her forehead to the low line of her hair, made her hands tremble a little. Then Biran raised his slow hand, took the burnt match from her, and the match box. And she went back to the tea table, while he lighted another match, lighted his cigarette, blew little spirals of smoke into the air.

The next day Biran said to Elsa, "I saw Zelinski to-day. He expects you tomorrow. And he does you the honour of being interested." He could not quite read her look. "I thought you were anxious to begin work." Still Elsa did not speak. "Have you changed your mind about becoming a great artist?" Rising, he crossed the room to the piano, where his violin lay in its case; Elsa was to use it for her own. "What will you play for Zelinski?"

Obediently, she took the violin from his hands, touched the strings hesitatingly. She had not played since her arrival in New York, but it was not that that kept the bow lax in her hands. Once she tried to play, drew a soft volume of sound into being; then the bow dropped from the strings. "I can't—when you look at me."

It was the first conscious self-consciousness she had betrayed, and Biran was rather pleased than otherwise. There had been moments when he doubted. The girl was too tractable. He had even recalled an earlier impression, that she was, temperamentally, like the smooth

surface of a lake that reflected every mood of its surroundings, without ever a ripple from its shallows to ruffle its unexpressive calm. But now, even after he had turned away his eyes, he felt the girl's awareness of himself; heard it in the uncertainty of her playing; knew she was not thinking of the music any more than he was thinking of it. Yet, contrary to his expectations, when the day came Elsa played very well for Zelinski. At the end of half an hour, the master motioned that it was enough. And ignoring the girl he said briefly to Biran, "I rather she play not so well with ze fingers, but herself have ze soul, ze esprit."

Biran held his peace. In six months' time he would feel more interest in Zelinski's opinion. It sufficed now that he consented to take Elsa as a pupil. And exchanging compliments with the queer little man who seemed anxious to be rid of them, Biran and Elsa went forth into the gay afternoon streets. They walked to the studio, and Biran at least was frankly pleased,—with Elsa, and the promise of her future; and with this afternoon that they were together. If Elsa's naïve youth was no longer to be the amusement of his idle hours, there was the more serious affair of her talent. So at last the real business of her life was put in train. But his only comment to her had been, "We'll surprise Zelinski by discovering not only a soul, but a heart as well." And her startled fleeting glance had rediscovered her profile to him.

A little later, in the studio, dallying in front of the mirror where she had paused to take off her hat, Elsa was perhaps reluctant to turn around. There was a subtle suggestion of intimacy in the scene. The girl's slight figure in its simple dress, the warmth of the room,

the sense of remoteness from the world without, all had their way with Biran, while he waited for her to turn from the mirror. His silent look drew her at last, and she came to him, not hesitating, yet shyly, and into his hands put both her own; his very silence was a flay to her quickening senses; yet as his hands closed on hers Biran felt her shrink a little, in sudden realization of his touch; then he drew her down beside him, impressing the strength of his hands on hers. He wanted suddenly to hurt her, to hurt her physically, to make her cry out to him, to feel her tremble under his touch, to hold her in the hollow of his hand. . . . But she made no effort to resist him, and after the first tremor her hands lay passive in his. Then the madness passed from Biran's brain, and he laughed, and released her hands; and rising, flooded the room with light.

Whatever was to be . . . the time was not yet.

Busy days followed for Elsa. Weeks passed without outward event, save for the brief meetings with Biran, who now spoke to her only of her music, or of Zelinski, and of his own hopes for her future; never by a word or a look recalling the incident of a moment that apparently never had been. Bewildered and silent, Elsa had little time or will to question all that perplexed her. For Zelinski was an exacting master, and drove his new pupil to the limit of her capabilities. The long hours of practice, and the nervous tension of the lessons when the master gave unbridled rein to his temperament, left her almost physically cowed. As often as not, Zelinski flew into a despairing rage, and, striding violently up and down the long room, would hurl bitter words at her, declaring that she could never hope to be

an artist, that the sooner she returned to her sweeping and baking the better; until his harsh scorn drove her out of the studio; when she would hurry blindly through the streets, and in her room would drag the violin out of its case, and dash the angry tears from her eyes. She would learn to play. She would be an artist. She would never go back,—a failure,—all her life to remember the little smile on Biran's lips, if she should fail, if Herr Zelinski should say it was no use, if Biran lost faith in her, if she had to go back. But perhaps the hardest moments of all followed the rare occasions when the master was forced to yield her his grudging approval. It was when he relented, and she would return to her room with his few words of praise swelling in her heart, that black loneliness overwhelmed her, and she cried out to the empty spaces of her bare room, What did it matter to anybody, what did anybody care, whether she could play or not? To Biran, when one day he surprised her with heavy eyes, she would admit nothing. "Has Zelinski been a brute to you?" But Elsa shook her head, turning away her eyes. Was she homesick? Biran demanded. And again she shook her head, No. Well, then, she was not to mope. Biran was very severe with her. She was to put on her hat and come with him for a walk.

Many days had passed since Biran had so little as knocked at Elsa's door to assure himself that she was alive. Nor had she been to the studio since the afternoon the thought of which still coloured her cheeks, the tips of her ears. The memory of it was in her eyes now as they walked through the streets, and not knowing how to disguise it she could only avert her glance. And Biran saw that the shadows under her eyes had deepened

until her cheeks looked hollow. She seemed physically exhausted, and languor was not becoming to her. But the brisk walk in the cold air revived her, and presently her eyes glowed; while Biran became gradually aware of the fact that he had not seen Elsa for a long time, that amid the busy interests of his days he had neglected her. Why had she not come to the studio, recalled herself to him in some way? He was curiously irritated, with himself, with her. Perhaps above all he had a poignant, growing sense of the passing of time, a swift regret for the loss of the days during which he had all but forgotten the very existence of this girl. . . . His memory embraced years, whereas hers went back only a few scant months, since she had begun to live. For her youth was the obvious, the flaunting thing about Elsa; it was that which made him, Biran, so keenly conscious of her presence by his side; her young eyes, the vivid play of youthful colour in her face. What in life was there better than youth? So he ignored an engagement that would have taken him away from Elsa; suddenly aware of his reluctance to leave this girl with her glowing eyes, for other distractions. In the course of their walk he said to Elsa, "Miss Noreen wants to know when you are coming to see her?"

"Do you think—I might?"

He had no intention to isolate Elsa from any friends she might make for herself; and the actress had spoken to him more than once of the girl with the young eyes. He could not know that second only to his own place in her thoughts was the thought of Miss Noreen in Elsa's mind. For Miss Noreen had seemed to be more at home in the studio than any of the other women whom Elsa sometimes met there. So now, the first flush of

excitement passed, Elsa was a little depressed. Miss Noreen had been kind to her, and Elsa did not easily forget a kindness, but the older woman's graciousness had but intensified the girl's consciousness of her own awkwardness; and a certain reluctance sprang full-fledged within her. She was suddenly aware of Biran's eyes scrutinizing her, with something more than their usual half-amused glance. Slowly following the line of her throat, his look dwelt on the contour of her shoulder, until he just caught the last flicker of her retreating glance. His keen look had seemed suddenly to pierce the thin protection of her coat, her little air of physical reserve; probing swiftly with some thought he left unvoiced. Of late, Elsa had more than once forgotten to remember that her friend was first of all an artist, had even forgotten that he was the great sculptor, who lived in a world apart from her own little existence. But she had not made the round of the galleries with Biran, nor walked the teeming city streets with him, without learning that a woman's face and figure were rightfully objects of open observation and comment. None the less, she flushed vividly, and again, in chagrin at herself for blushing, under Biran's eyes. She schooled her glance, ashamed of her confusion. And Biran said, if somewhat inconsequently, still not too startlingly, "If Miss Noreen asks you to a party you will need an evening dress." Already he had decided it was to be white; and as simple as the girl herself, he smiled a bit ironically. Would she disappoint him? As for Elsa herself, to whom a real evening dress was an adventure out of another world, she merely admitted, with all the simplicity of the fact, that she did not have an evening dress.

But as it happened Biran himself was host at the

first party to which Elsa wore the new dress. The day following its purchase, returning from her lesson, Elsa found a note bidding her be ready and looking her prettiest, when Biran came for her at seven that evening. With alternating sensations of high expectations and timid fears, she laid out the dress, despaired almost to tears over the arrangement of her hair; then in a spirit of desperation did something to it that brought a pleased smile to her lips when she regarded it in the mirror; and instead of the ribbon that hitherto had been to her the last word in the matter of adornment, she wound about her head a wreath of tiny white blossoms. The donning of the dress itself was accomplished in awesome, half-smiling uncertainty. She remained for a long time before the mirror, looking at herself with eyes that remembered every word Biran had ever said in her hearing of the beauty of women; finding new import in his critical selection of the dress, in the word or two he had said of her own appearance. She was glad she had this little time alone with the strange dress before she had to face Biran. She had never worn an evening dress before, she had never seen one worn, except at a distance of unreality, at the theatre. With no eyes to see, the warm colour suffused her neck and shoulders, until the skin looked soft and warm with a delicate glow she had never perceived before. She had acquiesced silently when the woman at the shop had put her into the dress; but she now had to realize her bared neck, her bare arms; she had to accustom herself to the idea, and then inure herself to the fact of it. Slowly, she smiled. Then she slipped on her long coat, folding the collar high about her throat, and sat down across the room from the mirror, looking away from it.

A quarter to seven. . . . She sat listening to the beating of her heart. Ten minutes. . . .

Then she lowered the muffling collar, slipped the coat from her shoulders, freed herself from the enveloping folds, when a rapid knock at the door—Biran's knock—froze the venturing smile in her eyes. For a moment she remained motionless, panic-stricken. Now, at once, without warning, she would have to face him. She drew up her coat, but it was too late; she could not keep him waiting. . . .

A little frightened, a little elated, she stood silent, unsmiling, before him, yet with a little air of assurance born of her secret knowledge gleaned from the mirror. Biran swept her with a swift glance. Then he put his hat on the table, drew off his gloves. She had not disappointed him, his slow look told her; and Elsa felt the blood rise in slow waves to her face, knew it faintly colouring neck and arms, felt it warming in her breast. From his pocket Biran drew forth a small box. A pressure of his thumb on the spring opened it before Elsa's eyes. Then he took the step between them and clasped the slender chain about her throat. For the moment his hands were busy with the clasp Elsa remained motionless; with the quietness of an obedient child, Biran mocked to himself; but the girl was no longer a child, whatever else she was not. He stood looking down into her eyes, at her face within a few inches of his lips; saw and realized the warm delicacy of her skin where the fine filigree of the chain lay about her neck, the two jewelled ends falling naturally into the exquisite hollow of her bosom where it rounded into the fullness of the low girlish breasts.

But Biran did not kiss her. He waited for her to tell

him how well she liked the necklace; and instead he saw in her eyes a swift intuition, the knowledge that he had refrained from kissing her.

Abruptly then, he said it was time to go.

As Elsa passed into the studio before him, Biran experienced the sensation of holding the door for a strange young woman whom he saw for the first time. Her self-consciousness was no longer the physical expression of inner discomfort. Something of Biran's sudden awareness of her womanhood had passed into Elsa's bearing; in the brief moment of a look, a touch, the senses of the woman had stirred for the first time in response to the man. A great white light beat upon all the world around Elsa. Entering her heart and soul, it informed her body to the last nerve of sensation. She had no actual feeling of time or distance; she came into the studio like a still, white shadow; seemingly part of the silence that fell upon her entrance. The length of the room stretched between her and the little group of Biran's guests already assembled to await their host. With one eye on the door, they had been speculating upon the surprise "*ce cher* Biran" had in store for them. Conjecture had been rife as to the lady in the case. And when the velvet curtains revealed Elsa to their gaze, the right word did not on the instant occur to any of them. Only the extremely slender woman who flashed across the sombre room like a vivid flame, laughed a little low sibilant laugh. Then Biran presented Elsa to his guests.

"It is—isn't it?—the little girl?" It was the gracious voice of Miss Noreen speaking, and the armour of icy cold melted from Elsa, as she yielded her hand, and felt it retained in a warm, reassuring clasp.

"The little girl turned young lady surprised me too," Biran answered; and there was a note—was it of pride? in his voice. Through the mist Elsa saw Biran looking at her while he spoke to Miss Noreen. And her hand still in the older woman's, she looked up at her. Above the splendour of the actress' dress, the girl saw her neck was too thin, and that there were tiny lines around her eyes. . . .

Dinner passed as in a dream. Elsa sat half the length of the table away from Biran. And if she made a pretence of eating the various dishes placed before her, she made none whatever of talking. After many fruitless efforts her neighbour at the table turned his attention elsewhere; while Biran and Miss Noreen, mutually engrossed, gave her no heed. Long before the end of dinner, the sparkle had gone out of her eyes, and she did not even taste the ices. For Miss Noreen *was* beautiful; and when she raised her coffee cup to her lips, and looked at her host over its edge, Elsa perceived dimly wherein she was beautiful; and that Biran had eyes for no one else. Her own little moment of triumph now overwhelmed her with self-shame. What matter the tiny lines around Miss Noreen's marvellous eyes? There was a dynamic quality about her gestureless attitude that reduced the vivacity of the other women to a crude restlessness. More and more Elsa understood what Biran had meant when he said the interesting thing about Miss Noreen was that she was not beautiful at all, only she made people think she was. An inherent radiance made nothing of the added years that yet had put their mark upon her, and that the clairvoyant glance of youth had glimpsed—to its own discomfiture. Elsa felt herself a creature too insignificant, too colourless,

even to merit comparison with the brilliance of Miss Noreen. Queer revelations, queer new instincts of comprehension, stirred in her heart and mind. The jewelled chain about her neck suddenly became a touchstone of knowledge. For had not Biran clasped it there merely as he might have added the coloured shades to the candles on the dinner table? It was the artist who had approved the line of her neck and shoulders,—and then forgotten her. Through the tumult of surging emotions, it suddenly appeared that Biran had other eyes than of the artist, that there was some subtle, more potent power than of mere beauty to attract him, to hold his glance.

Unconsciously, imitating Miss Noreen's gesture, Elsa raised her coffee cup to her lips, then put it down, untasted. A moment later, Miss Noreen had risen, and in the disordered movement about the table Elsa felt Biran at her side. They were going on to the opera; so they all returned to the studio together; and if Biran left her almost immediately to light a cigarette for the slender, sinuous woman in the grey and flame-coloured dress who had said no word to Elsa, still, for the moment, he had sought her. And later, when there was a little delay while they waited for the motors, he spoke to her. "Do you know how pretty you are tonight?" Elsa could no more resist his look than she could have released herself from the grip of his hand, had he chosen to hold her forcibly. "Why did you not talk to Van-Smythe? That's not the way to treat your dinner partner."

Quite unexpectedly, Elsa smiled, with eyes and mouth, an irrepressible little smile, of sheer, spontaneous happiness.—So he had not quite forgotten her at dinner,

or he could not have known she had not spoken with her neighbour at table. In the arrogance of her youth, she instantly exonerated Biran for his devotion to Miss Noreen, who had been *his* dinner partner, and who was a celebrity besides. For he had not been so devoted to Miss Noreen that he had forgotten her, Elsa. . . .

She did not speak during the drive to the opera house. The sudden blaze of lights, and Biran's hand at her elbow, recalled her to reality. Without volition on her part she was swept onward and up the stairs on a wave of graceful movement, the sensuous joy of light and sound and animation mounting to her senses, and in an exhilaration as of high places she moved forward with the same grace and confidence of the woman just in front of her. She scarcely felt the stairs under her feet; she felt suddenly taller, wonderfully taller; and when at a turn of the stairway she caught in a mirror a glimpse of a tall girl with a wreath of white flowers in her hair, and eyes that looked mysteriously back at her, she all but stopped, questioning the look of the tall girl in the mirror.

She had been to the opera before with Biran, when they had inconspicuously taken their seats among other inconspicuous persons; but now suddenly she found herself one of the real figures in the unreal picture. Slowly her wide gaze accustomed itself to the brilliance and glitter. The myriad of lights steadied, revealed to her the soft, shimmering black of Miss Noreen's dress, the deep, intense black of her hair barred with a band of scintillating light; the neck and arms of the other women gleaming white against the dark velvet hangings.

One by one the lorgnons were lowered. Greetings

with familiars in other boxes were exchanged. Interest waned. Miss Noreen turned her back on the house and was talking to young VanSmythe. The marvellously slender lady whose name Elsa had not heard, leaned toward her to speak to Biran. "It was not very nice of you, *mon cher*, to show us all up against the fresh charms of Miss Wide-Eyed-Youth here." For if she had not spoken to Elsa, the girl in the white dress and a wreath of flowers in her hair, whose sole ornament was a slender gold chain around her neck, was somehow not to be ignored, nor quite taken for granted. Elsa came back to earth with no very clear idea of what had been going on around her. Every laughing glance was directed at her, and she became suddenly aware of a man in the next box staring openly, and at her. The slender lady, who was still youthful with the tenacious youthfulness of ladies of her persuasion, smiled at Miss Noreen. "I know I want to go straight home and retire into a cap with strings, and put on the tea kettle."

Miss Noreen smiled at Elsa instead. "And I was thinking, were I a poet, I would dash home and dedicate a masterpiece to the Springtime of Youth."

The other woman laughed. "I should say that with the wreath of innocence and purity bound about her forehead, and the light of illusion in her eyes, Miss Elsa rather suggests a maiden decked for the sacrifice."

This time it was Biran who answered her. "Some day Miss Elsa is going to be a great artist, so your words may be prophetic. It is quite possible she may have to wear the sacrificial laurel."

The lady shuddered prettily. "Poor dear! At least I hope it will be as becoming as the rosebuds."

Miss Noreen met Biran's eyes over Elsa's shoulder. "Will nothing induce the Lord High Executioner to spare the pretty victim?"

"He will try to be merciful."

Perhaps most of all it was the new note in Biran's voice that deepened the colour in Elsa's cheeks, gave a touch of rigidity to her shoulders. She was peculiarly sentient, all her senses quickened, stimulated; and if she did not understand all they were saying, she comprehended there were underlying motives, and undercurrents of emotion, in the bantering speeches. No one addressed her directly, nor sought her averted glance. She might have been some strange creature disclosed to their curious gaze. Then a premonitory silence fell upon the house. The baton of the conductor rapped a sharp call to attention. Simultaneously, the audience was agitated in a last little flutter of adjustment as it composed itself to listen.

The opera was "Thais."

Leaning a little forward, thus unconsciously interposing her profile between Biran and the stage, Elsa gave herself to the music.

Into the deep silence wove the spell-conjuring melody of the violins, unfolding the passion of Thais. With haunting insistence it repeated again and again the theme of the beautiful wanton woman. It was not great music, nor in itself soul-stirring music; but to the girl Elsa's awakening consciousness it was like a clarion call. Gradually the atmosphere became surcharged with emotion. To many the dream-vision of the monk Athanael recalled reality too vividly to leave them unmoved. And even as the disturbing dream constricted

the throat of the sleeping monk, causing him to start half-awake, troubled, eager, so the slow, sensuous grace of the visioned woman, coquetting with her mirror, the speaking suggestion of silent movement, the sweep of lowered lids over eyes that smiled and stung; the scarlet line of her mouth; sent the blood tingling anew in more sluggish veins than the girl Elsa's. The child-like joy of the dancer in her own grace of body merged into the wile of the courtesan, while the hearts of men grew warm with passions long outlived, and memories decently forgotten. But Biran, sitting beside Elsa, had not spared a glance to the beautiful woman who held the house entranced. He had often enough paid her homage, to the woman and to her art; and would again; but he had never before seen it come to pass before his eyes, when the white flame of the soul caught colour from quickening senses. He saw it now in Elsa's face, while emotion weighted her eyelids with knowledge. Then suddenly some one laughed, constrainedly, brought to the breaking point of emotional endurance. From the shadows at the side of the box, the slender lady leaned into the light, speaking sharply, "That woman knows too much and tells it too openly."

With the descending curtain, the slight unease passed into light comment. A man's laugh echoed the slender lady's words. "Rather! It's too brutally frank, don't you know, the way these actor-folk expose the inner man to the eyes of the world—I quite agree with you." But the slender lady shook her head at the speaker, finger to lips, while her glance drew Elsa within the circle. Still a little bewildered by the music, Elsa smiled back at her. Young VanSmythe moved uneasily in his chair. He had been trying not to look at the

girl; to look at her face was like spying upon a person who thought himself safe from prying eyes; but the slender woman's laugh had thrust the door wide open. He broke into rapid speech. It had the effect of the picador's red flag, to distract attention from the critical point, to leave the girl out of it. "Oh, come now, the lady on the stage may not be all she makes one think of." He had no intention of being rude to the very slender lady, but somehow her flaming presence made the remark appear more malicious than guileless. But the young man was not thinking of her at all,—only of the girl whose profile obscured all else from him. "What's the use of being an artist if you can't use your imagination?"

The slender lady hid an incipient yawn. "All I contend is that she did not learn all her airs and graces posing before a mirror. She went out into the highways and the byways, into the night and the streets, and what she learned there she now reveals in all its nakedness before us." She shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Is it quite—decent?"

"But she couldn't, as an artist, choose only the beautiful and let the ugly go, even if one could always tell what was fine and what was vicious." VanSmythe knew, of course, that he was committing a social *bêtise*, appearing unduly in earnest; instead of merely sharpening the lady's barb. But he was young in conviction as well as in years; and he sought, as best he might, to screen the girl from the woman's informing smile. "It's the use we make of what we know that really counts. Nobody would call a painter or a sculptor indecent because he studies the human form. Ask Biran. He's an artist. He knows." He turned to Biran, demanding

to be upheld. Biran spoke for the first time. "Only an actor, like any artist, has to deal with the human soul—that's what you mean, isn't it?" VanSmythe nodded. He was not at all sure of his argument, only of its intention. He saw Elsa was listening, waiting for Brian's next words, and if he felt a sudden dislike for his host, he felt that at least the girl was safer with him than left at the mercy of the slender lady's smile. And if Biran did not, at the moment, welcome this distraction of his attention, he saw it was an opportunity, as good as another, to voice his faith for Elsa's knowledge. She must, of course, come to her own conclusions, but she must not start from wrong premises. "VanSmythe is quite right. An artist must strip right down through the husks of things to the 'kernel that nourishes.' An actor has to know the anatomy of the soul, so to speak, just exactly as the sculptor has to know the anatomy of the body. And there's just one way under the sun to learn about the human soul,—you have to see and feel and experience the workings of the soul just as you do of the human body. And when an artist masters both the soul and the body, then the world calls him a genius by the grace of God, because he unfolds before each man's eyes the potentialities that are in each man's heart."

The lady was not convinced. "But we do not have to wear our hearts on our sleeves. So little at least, our souls are our own, to keep their secrets."

"But, my dear lady, the point is that it is the artist's greatest privilege and sole duty to bring light to the blind eyes of his fellow-man. To do that, he has to make a torch of his own heart and soul, to the last potentiality, for good and bad alike. It is the ultimate

sacrifice,—of self,—if the heart he wears on his sleeve reveals to you the heart secreted in your bosom.”

She flashed him a quick look, then spoke with a pretty vivacity. “Mr. Biran is, of course, authority past dispute. And equally of course you agree with him, my dear Noreen?—But it must be fearsome, to be out in the streets, in the night.”

The actress smiled her slow, slight smile. “One must learn, naturally, before one has anything to say.” For the space of a breath her glance swept the other woman, then returned to the girl Elsa. She too had been watching the silent, motionless girl. In that atmosphere of elaborate sophistication, her simplicity was wonderfully piquant. It intrigued the older woman’s thoughts, quickened her imagination. The slender lady, following her glance, turned on Elsa. “I hope you have a brave heart, my dear. As you hear, it takes great courage to become an artist. And Mr. Biran says you are to be a great artist.”

Elsa found no words to answer. Somewhere in her brain many words were repeating themselves. The little uncertain smile that was becoming strange to her lips, hovered about the corners of her mouth. She sat very straight in her chair, her hands interlaced in her lap; only the folds of tulle across the low girlish bust were agitated with each deep-drawn breath.

And again Miss Noreen’s glance seemed to interrogate Biran, sitting silent and noncommittal, offering neither aid nor protection; and although Elsa had not turned to him, had not looked at him, the very poise of her averted head was instinct with the consciousness of his presence at her side. And Noreen, looking from Biran to Elsa, understood the significance of his silence,

and that he too had not been unobservant of the rounding arm, of the nearness of the girl; she looked at Elsa and saw her as Biran must see her,—the cameo-like profile, the soft lines of the dress falling away from the shoulders, the ingenious draping of the tulle . . . and speculation grew into certainty when over Elsa's shoulder Biran met her look, and smiled. A little devil of mischief leaped into his eyes, and the exultant sense of the master who feels the responding vibration of his instrument under the touch of his fingers on the strings. And if no breath of the girl had escaped him, he was equally aware of her awareness of himself.

The return of the orchestra to their places saved Elsa the necessity of replying to the smiling, insistent look of the slender lady. She turned quickly back to the stage, one hand dropped relaxed by her side, her attention instantly absorbed away from the little group surrounding her. Yet not so wholly absorbed but that under Biran's eyes a slow flush crept to her neck, rose to her cheeks. Under cover of the opening bars Biran spoke to her. "When the time comes—will you be afraid?"

The passing warmth of his breath was on her shoulder, and she turned, obeying the compulsion of his look. Slowly she raised her eyes. The spoken words had little meaning to her; she had understood so few of all the words that had been spoken that evening; but like a slow warming flame knowledge came to her. Slowly she shook her head. And as Biran's hand closed over hers, her silence answered him. She would not be afraid, not with him.

Elsa's hands lay folded in her lap again. Apparently she had lost consciousness of any one near her, of

Biran himself. Her immobility made him restless. He had a curious sensation that under her almost breathless calm mighty transformations were coming to pass. As the evening wore on, he grew impatient. The opera bored him. The singers had no power to move him. The close confines of the box, all these persons . . . why had he asked them all? above all, why had he asked them for supper; it would be hours . . . The interlude of strings had just come to its last notes. The inevitable encore was demanded. He did not want to hear the music again; but it would prolong the picture of the girl's face, her luminous eyes, while she waited for the stroke of fate to see if the baton would signal for the repetition. And when there was no longer any doubt, in a flash of forgetfulness Elsa turned to Biran with a happy little laugh, that as instantly was stilled on her lips; then he released her glance, smiling at her; but her joy was suddenly cowed. She kept her eyes on the raised baton. Her colour deepened and fled; and with the end of the Interlude, Biran told himself it was invariably a mistake to seek to repeat a beautiful impression. The light had been suddenly extinguished in the girl's face. And when the last curtain descended she rose as if it freed her from an ordeal of endurance. But Biran had engaged himself with Miss Noreen's wraps, and it was young VanSmythe who brought Elsa her coat and remained at her side, and who again sat by her at supper. Now and again the sound of Biran's voice came to Elsa, and Miss Noreen's rare laugh. Then at last Miss Noreen was drawing on her long gloves, and without raising her eyes Elsa knew the actress had extended her hand, knew Biran was bending over it, fastening the tiny buttons of the glove.

And with every nerve of her being she felt again the touch of his hand on her own; and a look of fear, of unknown and possibly fearful things, informed her eyes, trembled into expression in her smile, when she could no longer oppose mere silence to the insistence of her companion. VanSmythe had been patient, but he felt his opportunity slipping from him. Elsa heard his repeated question without hearing him speak. "I suppose Biran is going to take you home?" But Biran had not spoken to her, had not looked at her, since that passing clasp of his hand on hers. She was suddenly as afraid with the thought of being alone with him as she was afraid that he would send her home with some one else. But as if in answer to the young man's query, Biran beckoned to him, and Elsa saw that VanSmythe was to accompany Miss Noreen. Amid the general farewells, she found that she alone was remaining, that Biran was going to take her home. Shut within the intimate confines of the motor, they did not break silence during the short ride. In silence they went up the stairs to Elsa's rooms. Biran had the key, and for the moment he took to open the door Elsa stood aside, watching him. And again, while he turned on the lights, she remained motionless in the middle of the room, waiting. Then her hands fumbled nervously at the buttons of her coat, and Biran helped her unfasten it, and drew off the coat, stood holding it over his arm, seeming to tower above her, to dominate her.—It must have been the unaccustomed dress that for the first time revealed all the charm of her young figure to him; that raised a barrier between them, gave her an assurance, a little air of sufficiency, almost of aloofness from him. It must be that the dress had wrought such a change in her,—

women were like that,—Biran was thinking to himself; for tonight Elsa was all woman. Was it her femininity he felt subtly opposed to his uncompromising masculinity? With all the reviving interest of a new idea the realization came to him of a dawning womanhood. It piqued his imagination that the girl should have grown up in an hour.

As they stood there, the light from the chandelier struck down upon them, caught one of the jewelled ends of the necklace until it glowed like a little pool of living blood against the soft whiteness of the girl's neck.

“Aren't you going to thank me—for the necklace?”

He was rather desperately tempted; the girl's eyes and skin were aglow; after all, she could scarcely be thinking of the necklace. But he had to take her thanks from her eyes. Suddenly, he stooped and kissed her shoulder, lightly, not too seriously. The next moment he had said good-night, smiling down into her widening eyes; then Elsa was alone.

CHAPTER VII

HERR ZELINSKI had come to the end of his patience. He glared at Elsa with wrath and despair. He had all but snatched the violin from her hands. The sheets of music lay strewn about the floor, and standing mutely before the master, Elsa bowed her head to the storm. "*Hein?* What I say to Mr. Beeran when he ask me what is ze matter why zat Mademoiselle not make ze progress?" Zelinski was demanding, flourishing the violin in the air, almost shaking his fist at her. "You are of wood, you have not ze heart, ze feeling. Always you play, one, two, three, one, two—" With the first words of the outburst Elsa drew a deep breath of relief. With each succeeding gust of anger from Zelinski she felt the bonds loosening from about her heart, the ache of repression easing from her throat. "—It is not enough to have ze notes of ze music in ze brain, to put ze right finger on ze right note. To play like zat—it is like ze music box when one touches ze button—so—and it play. I say to you, a little more sentiment, Mademoiselle;—and you play ze exercise with ze fingers! Very admirablement you play ze exercise with ze fingers, it is true, but it is not for that one is artiste. To play ze real music one must have in ze heart ze real feeling. It is necessaire, Mademoiselle. I, ze master, cannot teach you to play ze music of Schumann, if you have not ze love of Schumann in ze heart. It is impossible I teach you zat."

Under the rapid torrent of the master's words, Elsa

had become a child again, alone in an unfriendly world, with the need and blessed power to weep tears of loneliness and heartache. The tears sprang to her eyes, cooled her cheeks. For the first time in two nights and two days, the little pulse in her throat where Biran's lips had touched it, stilled, and was quiet. It was as though suddenly the fever had ebbed from a physical hurt.

For she had not seen Biran again since the evening of "Thais."

During the long hours of the night after he kissed her and left her alone, the sources of her life had been drained to the last drop, only to discover new depths, richer sources of feeling. And for the very fear in her heart that the music betray her, that her heartbeats pass into the strings of the violin and reveal the terrors and exultations of her heart, she had forced herself to think only of the written notes of the music. The whip lash of Zelinski's words hardly flecked the surface of her pride. The irate little man with dishevelled hair and wildly gesticulating hands, had less reality to her in that moment than the vision before her eyes,—of the big bare studio where she and Biran had worked together, making it beautiful for his habitation; the words he had once spoken to her, of the sunshine of heaven, and love. Something hard and unyielding in her suddenly became fluid. And the master, pausing in his excited walk, altered his tone brusquely. He thrust the violin back into Elsa's hands. "Zat is good zat you know how to cry. Ze tears are like ze dew of heaven—zey make feelings to grow in ze heart. Maybe sometime you can make ze real music, if you know how to cry. I believe you know only how to look like ze image

on ze wall, always at nothing, thinking of nothing, feeling nothing. Now make ze real music, from ze heart, not with ze fingers alone." He turned his back on her, went to the farther end of the room. And she raised the violin to her shoulder, slowly raised the bow to the strings. For a moment there was no sound in the room. Then Elsa began to play. . . .

Zelinski, facing the door, motioned to Biran to stop where he was. But Biran, listening from the doorway, needed to see Elsa herself. Cautiously, he advanced into the room, stood where he could watch her, himself remain unseen; and Elsa, her gaze lost in the dim corners of the room, did not hear him. A swift glance passed between Biran and the master. Something sang and thrilled from the strings . . . something that had not been there a month ago when Biran had last heard Elsa play; that had not been there ten minutes ago, when the master had flown into a rage at her. And while he listened, a little doubt awakened in Biran's thoughts,—not of his critical judgment now,—but simply of pity for this girl, as he might have felt pity for any helpless creature caught in the trap of life. That he himself had laid the snare before her was perhaps cause for compunction, but not for regret. Yet he might even have found it in his heart to relent, to send her back to the safe aridity of a life that demanded nothing from her, if it gave her nothing in return. The very fact that she was playing extraordinarily well made him hesitate before the future; she would have to learn to play so very much better, if she was to continue playing at all. . . .

Quite frankly, Biran had said to himself that this girl must be made to feel every searing flame of emo-

tion, her heart be tempered by blasting cold and heat, her very body in its soft and tender youth made to know pain, that out of torment might come greater emotions, comprehensions attainable only through ultimate experiences. And was not love the all-embracing emotion? He knew that to a mere woman-creature it might become equally all-exclusive; but he had, first and last, only to do with the potential artist in the girl Elsa;—the woman in her must take her chances of joy and happiness in the fruition of the artist.

He waited, a little impatiently, for her to finish playing; and almost before the last notes were whispered on the strings he crossed the space between them. In that moment Elsa was beautiful. It was as if a light flooding into dark spaces illumined them with its radiance. And standing before her, Biran received Elsa's first glance.

From the far end of the room, the master came to them with excitement in his voice, with many words. His pale eyes were suddenly vivid with colour, and he took Elsa's hand that held the bow and raised it to his lips. "*Mademoiselle, mes compliments,*" he said. "Some day you do me honour when you say 'I have study with Zelinski.'"

Biran took it for granted that the lesson was finished. And while he waited for Elsa, he gave ear to the master's opinion of her. "Ze young lady have ze heart, after all," Zelinski spoke with conviction.

The little pulse in Elsa's throat throbbed into life again. Their steps were directed towards the studio. Apparently Biran had no thought in his mind of their last parting. And Elsa told herself that the kiss on

her shoulder meant nothing more than if it were a casual touch of his hand on hers. But for two days and two nights she had thought of nothing else. The light touch of his lips had penetrated to the very fibres of her body and soul. The memory of the kiss was in her slightest gesture, informing her silence, trembling into her few words, mystifying her infrequent smile. Biran, watching her at the tea table, had to realize all over again what a child she was, blushing at his slightest banter. She had brewed tea, and the two cups stood untasted; in a moment she left the chair by the tea table and did not immediately choose another. Biran spoke to her suddenly. "Zelinski flatters himself he has discovered you have a heart."—The only question now was to discover it to the girl herself, the feminine heart being somewhat chary of discovering itself. Because, presently, Biran could not quite account for his own mood, he became ironical. Perhaps he was not so unconscious of the memory of the kiss that was between them as Elsa supposed. At all events, having confronted her with the remarkable information that she possessed a heart, it now behooved him to help her to a realization of the wonderful fact.

Her face averted, Elsa remained very still. She had tried to speak words in answer—the mere words were nothing,—if only she could have uttered them as lightly as Biran had spoken! It was the little silence that gave sudden significance to a situation that had been without significance had she found words to say. Biran refrained from looking at her. For a passing second he was ashamed of himself, sorry for the girl. He had a swift perception that she was quite at his mercy, that her salvation or damnation was in his

hands, that he held full power over her woman's body and soul. For an uncomfortable moment he had the sensation of having intruded beyond the doors of her maidenhood. . . .

He threw away his cigarette then, hesitated, uncertain whether to go to her. To go to her would be to take her into his arms, to possess himself of her, to put his mark on her, soul and body to make her his, the man's. They were alone together in the world. And for that one moment when her eyes had looked into his, she had been beautiful. . . . There would be other moments . . . when she would grow beautiful under his eyes. If she did not yet love him, and so rightfully belong to him, it was because she did not yet know how to love. If he had not yet said a word of love to her, it was because she had first to learn the language of love. His kiss had taught her much; it had kindled the fires of consciousness in her; a word, a touch, would vivify them into flames of knowledge.

Suddenly he felt his hands strong, with the inexorable will to possess.

He owed her knowledge. It was by his will she was removed from the ordinary means of knowledge that await a girl. He had decreed that she was to live her life to the end of becoming an artist. All else was to be sacrificed to her art. And his only concern was with the soul of the artist. That she was a girl-creature, and young, and that she had it in her to be beautiful,—all this was the material ready to his hand, the making of an artist.

His eyes on Elsa, Biran waited.

For a lengthening moment, they shared the same thought, of his kiss. Where his lips had brushed her

shoulder, the touch of her skin had been soft and warm.

Across the deepening silence Elsa felt the thought in his mind reaching out to her. She was powerless to move for the very fear of something creeping upon her. The long moment passed, and another, and neither the man nor the girl moved. Then Biran decided against it. He lighted a cigarette, looked away from Elsa. Shorn of its civilized trappings, the scene had been one of savage primitiveness; of the male stalking his mate through the maze of the forest; and just in time Biran had realized it. If he took the girl now, the soul of her would scorch to ashes in the flame that warmed her body into life. His embrace would make her his woman, and so lose to him all that for a mad moment allured him in her, that still tantalized him. He rose presently, and went to Elsa, his eyes asking nothing of her. "I am going to have in some people one of these days to hear you play. I did not realize until this afternoon what progress you had made. Another six months with Zelinski, and you'll be ready for Europe." He was prepared for her glance when Elsa looked up. "Did you think Zelinski was the last word on the subject?"

"That's something you'll have to learn, that there's no stopping, once you start, unless you choose to drop out." To himself he was thinking that her habit of swiftly lowered lids, the swift veiling of her eyes, the little withdrawal into herself, was as effective, far more alluring, than any studied coquetry of experience. "You'll go to Europe, and it will be like beginning at the very beginning of things again. Then the day you begin preparing for your first concert—that again will seem like the beginning of reality; then some man will make you swear you never had lived before the moment

he came into your life; and the moment he goes out of it you will either know freedom for the first time, or sorrow will open your heart to a world you had never known before—and that will be another beginning. And so it will go on, until the day comes when you will find yourself looking back instead of forward—then you can put your violin away, and rest.”

Although she had made no movement, it suddenly flashed upon Biran that the girl's awkwardness was a thing of the past, that all lesser degrees of self-consciousness had merged into the greater consciousness of self. He saw in her eyes that she was not thinking of the music any more than he had been thinking of it, while he spoke to her. Nevertheless, he asked, “Will you like to go to Europe?” For the space of a breath that he looked into her eyes, her whole being was in solution. Biran read in them the swift question, “And you?” they had asked.

He just touched the tip of her upturned chin with his finger, as he might have soothed the wistfulness of a child. He must not take her too seriously, if she was going to look at him like that. . . . Six months was a long time . . . and he answered her look with a look that neither promised nor denied.

CHAPTER VIII

WITHIN an hour of her arrival at Elsa's lodgings, Miss Colt had used her eyes and her discernment to no small purpose. As to Elsa herself she reserved judgment. But she had an instinctive "nose" for financial values, besides an acquaintance with one or two persons who had had experience of sojourns in large cities; and she had made inquiries. Elsa's letters, characteristically deficient in details though they were, had given her cause for reflection, and the first account of her sister's expenses did not lessen Miss Colt's wonder. The single item of "hat," simple enough in itself, yet roused curiosity, for Elsa happened to mention the name of the milliner; and Miss Colt's familiarity with names instantly noted the incongruity of the modest sum expended in the purchase of the hat. On alighting from the train, and spying out Elsa, her first instinctive glance had been at the hat. Likewise her first survey of Elsa's rooms yielded her a mental calculation. She had already from a chance acquaintance on the train learned of Herr Zelinski's renown, and the exorbitant price of lessons with him. And now, making a sisterly round of the rooms, she glanced into a closet, saw the shimmering folds of the evening dress hanging in the place of honour; and was confirmed in her surmises. Elsa had remained in the other room to attend to some detail for her sister's comfort, and Miss Colt presently returned to her there, and when a decent period had elapsed in

the exchange of fragmentary remarks, she asked the question paramount in her mind, "Where did you get the money for all this?"

Elsa looked at her in amazement. "The money?"

"—The money which pays for these rooms, and the violets, and the dress in your closet, and the hat you were wearing this morning."

It was not dissembling; plainly Elsa did not understand. She was hurt, puzzled, by her sister's manner. "I wrote home about the hat and the dress. I had to have them. Father said I was to get what was necessary." When she saw her sister still waited, she went on. "Of course I have to be careful. Everything costs more here than it does at home. There are lots of things I do without. I always walk to my lessons, and save carfare, and things like that."

"How did you find these rooms?"

"Mr. Biran knows the woman who rents them. They were ready for me when I came. And he sent the violets—he knew you were coming today—he is always thoughtful about everything."

Miss Colt suddenly altered her inquisitorial tone. She remarked merely, "It must be rather difficult to know where to shop."

Against the suddenly incriminating background of the white dress thus again exposed to view before Miss Colt's eyes when Elsa opened the door of the closet to put away her coat, it was a little difficult to believe that Elsa so instantly realized her sister's thought without its import. "A friend of Mr. Biran's was going to give a party, so Mr. Biran went with me—"

"—To buy the dress?"

For the first time a shadow of embarrassment touched

Elsa's eyelids. But she answered without hesitation, "Yes."

Then Miss Colt came to the point briefly and directly. "Who paid for the dress?"

The girl's eyes opened wide. "Why, Harriet! Of course I did."

"Father hasn't sent you any extra money."

"I had enough. Anyhow, the dress was a bargain. The woman told me so. Of course, it is a very nice dress."

This also Miss Colt accepted without comment. She returned to the point of departure. "Did you have a pleasant time at the party?"

Without warning, a flood of colour suffused Elsa's face. For the first time she dissembled. "Oh yes." She had not understood the purport of her sister's questions, but with the remembrance of the time she had worn the white dress flaming in her cheeks, she had a premonition that Harriet suspected her, of what, she could not quite comprehend. She was suddenly on the defensive; to give herself courage she became defiant. Harriet had no right to think such things about her; her very vagueness as to the "things" her sister's questions implied, made her rebellious. She did not know what to say, what not to say. She drew herself up with dignity. Why should not Mr. Biran have gone with her to buy the dress?

"You will have to come home, of course."

Instantly panic flew into Elsa's eyes. Something more vital than the dignity of offended youth stiffened her shoulders. Miss Colt was not severe. "Come home with me quietly, and I'll say no more about it."

Elsa did not speak. What could she say to Harriet,

who was talking about something that had no reality to her, Elsa. What could Harriet know of what the white dress really meant to her, of the thoughts and memories it awakened in her frightened heart? She rose slowly. "I don't know what you are talking about, but I am certainly not going back. I don't know what you can be thinking, but it isn't so, whatever it is." Go back—! Until she had heard the words spoken, they had been the most natural words in the world for Elsa to hear. Now, suddenly, she knew she would never—go back. The decision was made before she was aware of the need of decision. She drew a long breath. Miss Colt, quite at ease in her mind, was watching Elsa with interest. She had seen it at once, that Elsa had more than fulfilled any promise of prettiness the elder sister had seen in her. And in addition to her discerning eye, Miss Colt possessed an unwonted quality,—she gave credit to others for equal discernment. She had not doubted that the sculptor had likewise seen "possibilities" in Elsa. That they had not, pre-eminently, to do with Elsa's musical abilities, she was equally sure. She had from the first been opposed to a young girl being left to the designs of a strange man. That the man would naturally have designs upon the young girl she could not doubt. But she did condemn her sister for being the girl. It was too simple of Elsa— Seeing that Elsa would not speak, she brought the matter to definite terms, "I suppose we can find a room tomorrow, or I could engage these rooms for a day or two until you are ready."

Elsa said, "Ready for what?"

"My dear Elsa, are you left any choice?"

"If you mean—to go back—I am not going back—"

"Then the decision will have to be taken out of your hands."

"You mean father will stop giving me money?"

"I mean you will come home with me."

"No."

It was then Miss Colt decided the time had come to speak plainly. "I suppose you understand—now—that a respectable girl can't be kept by a man—even in the interests of art—and remain—respectable."

"I'll work. If I have to, I can work."

Miss Colt continued. "I am going down now to see the landlady." And Elsa let her go without a word. With feverish fingers she unfastened the collar of her dress, found the clasp of the necklace, crushed the slender chain with its jewelled ends, in her hand. When Miss Colt returned, Elsa had not moved. But she looked up at the sound of the door closing, and waited for Harriet to speak. "It was very simple. I told her I wanted rooms like yours for myself, so she told me her price." From her handbag Miss Colt drew a card and a pencil. The slight sound of the pencil was perfectly audible in the silence of the room. Then she put the card down on the table before Elsa's eyes. "You can see, Herr Zelinski's prices are also something more than you reckoned." Elsa took up the card, read each item. The thing was there, before her eyes, in the black and white of her sister's precise figures. What she received from her father did not quite cover the cost of the rooms she occupied.

She was not so young, not so without experience, that she had not now to accept her own understanding of the fact that Biran had spent money for her.

“—And it is an easy step, my dear child, from buying a girl a hat, to buying the girl herself.”

Still Elsa said nothing. That all this time he had been paying money for her he had been within his rights to consider he had a claim upon her, a right to some return from her, she had yet to understand.—But he had kissed her. Had the gift of the necklace *bought* him the right to kiss her—?

A flame of shame burned her from head to foot.

For one mad moment she was tempted to throw the necklace on the table before her sister's eyes, as the card had been tossed to her. It might even be she had earned the money he had paid. He had taken his due . . . with a kiss. . . .

But Miss Colt, seeing the look Elsa turned upon the card, felt the lesson had been sufficiently learned. After all, the child had been guiltless, however in the wrong she was. “I am not blaming you, Elsa. Perhaps I spoke too abruptly. I see you did not know. But it's all right now. Now that you do know. And we won't say anything more about it.” She moved about the room as she spoke, gathering up her things. “We've missed you at home.” She spoke cheerfully, briskly, going methodically about her preparations for the night. “I'll certainly be glad of a good night's rest.” She went into the bedroom, busied herself over her traveling-case. “I must say you have profited by your stay here. You have quite the air—I noticed it the moment I saw you. At home, we're still wearing the trimming at the back of our hats.” She laughed, contemplating her own hat with a nod of speculative thoughtfulness as she put it away. And Elsa heard her humming a little tune. Through the tumult of her mind, the thought

went round and round in Elsa's head of the something different about Harriet, too; and presently she found herself thinking of a fern she had once neglected, and how she had watched the leaves revive under her eyes, when she had given it water, and loosened the earth about the roots.

The little tune on Miss Colt's lips wavered, presently slipped into silence. As she moved about the inner room, she now and again caught sight of Elsa. They had never been demonstrative towards each other, and Miss Colt did not know how to express her impulse to comfort Elsa. She was sorry if she had appeared unkind, but Elsa had shown signs of stubbornness, and one had to be firm. No doubt the child's pride was hurt. Perhaps she shrank from explanations.—Miss Colt paused in the doorway. "It's an unpleasant situation, of course, Elsa; but there's nothing to make a scene about. We'll just say you've decided to return with me. That will be all that is necessary." Again she passed on. And her words were added to the endless chain of meaningless words in Elsa's mind. All her life Harriet had never come nearer to anything than avoiding a scene about it. Slowly, Elsa's fingers relaxed about the chain she held crushed in her palm. No explanations, nor the avoidance of explanations, could take from her the memory of the slender gold chain warming in her bosom. Slowly, she opened the drawer of the table, coiled the necklace in a far corner, softly closed the drawer. And when Miss Colt called, "Aren't you coming to bed?" she went at once. She looked suddenly very tired, and Harriet forebore speaking to her. Presently Miss Colt slept. And over and over again, through the long hours, Elsa sought in vain to shut out the phantasm of memo-

ies from her hot eyes,—the passing touch of a hand, a fleeting look,—all came to life in her heart; where like a testing acid her sister's words bit into every emotion, revealing it true or false.—That she, Elsa, had been living on Biran's money was past dispute. That such an idea had never crossed her mind, was beside the question;—Harriet would say she knew it now. Harriet had said,—the words flashed in letters of fire before her,—a man like that thinks no more of buying a girl, than he thinks of buying the girl—a hat. How was he to know, she, Elsa, did not know he had bought her a hat? Then suspicion sprang full-grown in her breast. Passing glances, halting phrases, suddenly assumed meaning to her. She remembered she had been an object of curiosity to Biran's friends. Did all these persons know he had been paying out money for her? Was that why they never asked her a question, but accepted her at his naming? She was known to the circle at the studio as Miss Elsa merely. She remembered there was often much talk of other women who were known to them all by a single name. . . .

There was little coherence in her thoughts. Still she was aware of a thin thread of reassurance running through the turmoil of her uncertainty. It was not so easy, even if the few words that had revolutionized her world were true in the sense Harriet spoke them, all at once to repudiate what she knew she could never forget. . . . Yet were they all thinking those things about her? that she did not know, in definite terms, exactly what "those things" were, but added to her distress. When night had worn to morning, she was no longer sure in her own soul. She shivered, and drew the blanket closer about her, as if to hide herself from many eyes. For

how was he to know she had not known about the hat? With his own hands he had clasped the slender chain around her neck. And he had kissed her. . . .

The blackness of night was not black enough, nor deep enough, to hide her from herself.

Miss Colt did not press the point of an immediate departure. Of course the whole arrangement of Elsa's sojourn in New York was most irregular; she had been genuinely disturbed by Elsa's situation; but the modern mind has a mechanical facility in adjusting itself to circumstances; and having assured herself that no actual harm had been done,—Elsa's simplicity having apparently stood her in good stead,—Miss Colt could not but take into account that the man in the case was, after all, an extenuating circumstance, in that the world, willy-nilly, had to allow its celebrities a certain latitude in eccentricity of action. And in a way it was a compliment to Elsa. To have been the protégée of the famous artist was no small distinction in itself; and the child had undoubtedly been improved by the experience. On the whole, Miss Colt was inclined to be very tactful with Biran. She would maintain the pretence of the family's gratitude to him for his kindness to Elsa, and at the same time would relieve him of any further necessity of kindness. She had her opportunity the very day after her arrival. Elsa was away at her lesson when Biran called, and quite naturally his first words were of Elsa. "You will want a report of the little sister," he had said at once.

Miss Colt felt herself suddenly recalled to the matter in hand. She said, a little hurriedly, words she had not meant to say. "She has improved wonderfully."

"Ah! You have heard her play?" It was a confirmation or her remark, rather than a question. Miss Colt answered: "No. Not yet. I meant she has—improved—in health." She was thinking how wonderfully Elsa's complexion had freshened. "As I told her last night, she has profited greatly by her visit." She used the word purposely, to prepare for the casual mention of Elsa's return home with her. Her momentary distraction from it confirmed her more visibly in the rôle of elder sister. Biran spoke cordially. "Miss Elsa has not disappointed me." Thereupon Miss Colt answered appropriate words of thanks. "We feel we have imposed too greatly on your kindness."

Biran reassured her. "I have been well repaid for what little I have had the pleasure . . . Miss Elsa has a charming personality, as well as a great talent for the violin, Miss Colt."

Miss Colt sat a little straighter in her chair. Yet she found it unexpectedly difficult to put this man in his place, to show him that Elsa was once again under the wing of her natural protectors. Opportunely or no, but to Miss Colt's relief, Elsa's arrival at the moment caused a diversion. She came into the room not expecting to see Biran, but at sight of him the strained look went out of her face. In a single glance doubt was suddenly dispelled from her eyes. And she went bravely forward, the vanished doubt trembling into a welcoming smile. "I knew he was like that," the relief and joy of it was in her eyes as she gave her hand to her friend, as she knew him. And when later she played to them, the half-shy, half-daring happiness of her heart was in her playing. Miss Colt professed herself delighted. But more and more she found it difficult to realize that this

graceful, smiling, self-possessed girl was Elsa. Her apparent insensibility to the delicacy of her position with this man rather shocked her sister's conception of what was fit and proper; but they had agreed there was not to be a scene,—at least she had promised Elsa there would not be a scene,—and the child had pride. But when presently Miss Colt found herself engaging to dine with Mr. Biran; . . . the moment had passed when she could with dignity and finality put the man in his place.

CHAPTER IX

SO a week passed.

After all, Miss Colt could understand there was a certain fascination in the life Elsa was living. She herself had never before had the experience of carrying a latch-key. And she had met some really clever and agreeable persons at tea in the sculptor's studio. She had to admit there was an atmosphere; a peculiar interest and charm; if she was not quite sure of certain distinctions she sensed as existing, the women she met at Biran's tea table were obviously socially impeccable. And if once or twice some flagrantly unorthodox point of view had caused her to gasp mentally, as it were, she caught herself making allowances. She felt a certain exhilaration in trimming her sails to the conversational wind. It became a point of pride with her to remember that one must be broadminded enough to allow for differences of temperament and environment, however one might regard the differences themselves. She was even prepared to admit a certain license of thought, even a certain freedom of speech was permissible; always providing it did not extend to conduct. In the matter of conduct her standards remained inflexible. But in Biran there was no suggestion of unkempt locks, of anything in the least savouring of the flowing-scarf and velvet-jacket variety of artist. One could, with Biran, venture upon a discussion of matters that were not topics of casual conversation; and Miss Colt had a fondness for clever discussion. She was not a little impressed by the frequent mention to her of names to conjure with, and

within the first week she accepted with equanimity the introduction of a visiting celebrity whose affairs of the heart had set tongues to wagging the length and breadth of two lands. To be sure, she had an instant's qualm on behalf of Elsa; but there was nothing to suggest contamination about the charming gentleman, bowing profoundly, after the Continental fashion, over her hand. And when later, in comment upon his interesting guest Biran said, "You've read his 'Aphrodite,' of course?" she did not disclaim the assumption. Instead, she listened without the flicker of an eyelash while Biran took up the cudgels in behalf of his friend, who had been judged and condemned on every count in the calendar, save the one point on which the public had the right to judge him, namely, as the author of his books, with which fact alone they had any concern. To refute a doubt as to the writer's sincerity he told them briefly his life story. "And that's the man an ignorant and hypocritical public presumes to criticize and condemn, because he refuses to recognize self-imposed limitations of thought and emotion that make the rank and file of humanity voluntary prisoners behind the bars of their own fear and slothfulness.

"Most persons have hopelessly anemic minds. They will go to any lengths to save themselves from thought and emotion, from mental activity of any kind. They cannot understand that the mental and emotional life of man needs sustenance and replenishment no less than the body needs food. Therefore they pronounce anathema upon thoughts and emotions and experiences of which they have no need or knowledge, content as they are to relapse into sentimental stagnation. If you have read 'Aphrodite'—"

It was all very interesting, very unusual; Biran's grave smile, the slight, lingering shrug of his shoulders, bore in themselves a challenge, an irrefutable conclusion. "What if a few of the commonplace virtues are sacrificed to the greater end, to nourish a creative talent that in its turn gives the rare gift of its fruit to inspire and sustain the world! It is a shortsighted society that would rob itself of such a book as 'Aphrodite,' for the smug satisfaction of counting its creator within the fold."

Not to appear timid of broad issues, not to agree too unreservedly with this aspersion upon the homely virtues, Miss Colt accepted the gauge of argument. "In a word, then, you believe that—shall we say temperament?—should be developed at the expense of—character, perhaps."

Generalization had a fascination for Miss Colt. Moreover, speaking in generalities, one could, as in a paper hunt, enjoy all the excitement of the chase without having to witness its distressing results,—of the ravening pack closing upon the agonized fox. "Yet there is hardly a question, is there? whether temperament or character in the individual is of greater value to the world."

It was, plainly, a new idea to her host. "My dear lady, why of necessity should one exclude the other?"

Having removed the point at issue to the safer realm outside personalities, Miss Colt was prepared to enter into a discussion of temperamental peculiarities. "Doesn't it?"

"I should say temperament was the outward and visible expression of the inner man, that is, of his character."

Miss Colt was sure of her argument. "But does not character presuppose a certain balance, while the very existence of temperament depends upon excess—of a few emotions—over others." She was even emboldened to come to closer quarters with particular cases. "We were speaking of your friend just now. Isn't the author of 'Aphrodite' a case in point? and in varying degree perhaps, but it is true of most artists, is it not?"

"Excess of temperament, or absence of character?"

Miss Colt was momentarily confused. She had not meant to go so far. But there was stimulus in the air, and she was mired in the quicksands of a direct application of generalities even as she remembered that she was speaking with one of that same artist-fraternity.

Biran continued seriously. "That, of course, would depend upon what one called character." He was guilty of deliberate banality. Apparently giving his entire attention to the conversation, he was in reality occupied in contrasting the points of dissimilarity between the two sisters. Miss Colt's views on character scarcely interested him, but it did interest him to watch the play of expression on Elsa's face.

"Of that, surely, there can be no question." Miss Colt felt the ground firm under foot again.

Biran took time to light a cigarette. In the little pause, he experienced a vast reassurance. No. The girl Elsa's heart and mind would never be satisfied with that shallow alertness, that surface ease, the fruitless emotions, of a Miss Colt. On a sudden impulse, he gave his mind to what he had to say. Seeing the sisters together reawakened in him a sense of vital issues, of

poignant reality, a consciousness of destiny. Beneath her silent acquiescence, how deeply would the girl Elsa feel and believe? Was she aware of the world beyond her doorstep? He did not again look at her, but it was for her comprehension that he spoke, though still addressing himself to the older sister. "I venture the question. It is impossible, you know, that we should all regard the world from the same angle of vision. Inevitably, each one of us three, for instance, has a different conception of even the outward aspect of this world in which we live. We would never have seen the panorama from exactly the same point of view. There are always atmospheric conditions to be taken into consideration, subtle differences of vision; and who is to say whose is the true vision? Surrounded by the same things, no two of us ever see them exactly alike. It is our relative position to the object that makes it look large or small. In the end, it is merely a question of who holds the strongest conviction." . . . To how much, or to how little, had the girl awakened? Did her passivity cloak, or express, what lay behind the intent look she turned upon him? "And, good or bad, conviction in itself is of small value, unless it lodges in the breast of some one who can, and will, metamorphose it into fact,—into mental or moral or physical actuality." In the little pause, of breathless intensity on the part of both sisters, Biran felt Elsa, almost visibly, trying to encompass something that still escaped her. "—You say of artists that they are notoriously"—he smiled slightly upon the older sister, deliberately and obviously changing his phrasing of it—"temperamental. You are quite right. How else? That much-abused thing—artistic temperament—is merely the gift of fluid self-

expression—its medium; self-expression being the one end and aim of the artist!"

Miss Colt had abandoned her tentative air of being on the point of taking her departure. She was listening now to the great and famous artist, as well as to her charming host, and she felt it was a moment for which to have lived.

"Your meat may be my poison. Yet fundamentally we may individually possess all the virtues, be our temperaments a world apart each from the other." His slow smile included all three of them, neither extolling nor depreciating. "It is only that the more one has to express the more difficult it sometimes becomes. The—eccentricities—of temperament, to which you take exception, are nothing more or less than the unavoidable blunders of a stranger finding his way about in a foreign language he has not yet mastered. The simplest ways become labyrinthian passages when one is groping in the dark. . . . One feels intensely, and so the need grows and clamours for expression; one has to seek the word, the deed, the emotion . . . and whatever mad thing he does by the way, it is the truth the artist seeks, and truth is the one thing an artist owes his public."

Athwart her rapt attention, almost escaping to her tongue, the thought made Miss Colt quickly avert her eyes. That the mad thing, this so-called truth, should so often take the form of running away with another man's wife, which was the particular temperamental expression for which the world condemned Biran's friend the author—It became suddenly clear that Biran was defending not only his friend, but also his conduct. And when in the name of truth a man justifies unjustifiable things—

Biran divined her thought instantly; it was so obviously the thought she must think; saw the half-formed intention in her uncertain movement; but he did not mean that she should take Elsa away just yet. He smiled, taking her into his confidence; and Miss Colt put aside her gloves. But her glance remained slightly furtive; she was a little on her guard; for the first time she felt that perhaps their host subscribed to these same eccentricities of conduct that his well-ordered establishment denied. But the artist was neither a libertine nor a stupid man; he was merely more in earnest and interested than he had been for many a day; Miss Colt was entertaining angels unaware. As if there had been no interruption, Biran continued speaking the thought in his mind. "Each of us has in himself the Lydian stone that for him determines the value of all things. And life becomes beautiful and fruitful and poetic, or it is sordid and mean and hopelessly dumb. The experiences of life are to each man what the man is himself. And whatever their importance to the individual, what is of importance to the world is the genuine expression of experience. That is the artist's province. And he is great and of value to the world only in the degree to which he is articulate; just as he becomes articulate only to the degree, and by the grace, of something to articulate. Take, for example again, my friend who wrote 'Aphrodite.' The public rends him limb from limb; it is true they read his books; and what does the very breath of his life that he has put between book covers for their enlightenment, mean to their little minds and second-hand souls? That the man is unconventional in his relations with women!" He held Miss Colt's glance unwaveringly. "Because the multitude is satis-

fied to take the most beautiful emotion in life—the love of a man and a woman—and put it to the uses of a dull and sordid world, they cry anathema upon any man or woman who conceives other uses for their love than a means of securing an establishment, or any debasement of love, within the law of the land, for his or her greater ease and comfort. After all, in a word, what is marriage but the practical application of love to meet the practical issues, not of life, but of the day? ”

Once again Miss Colt abandoned the idea of departure; but she felt the time had come for tactful diversion. A little illogically, with her passion for generalities, she combined a habit of classification. It put her more at her ease now that she could isolate and name the disturbing thing about Biran. “You are an individualist, aren’t you?”

Biran admitted what must have been an accusation.

He was frankly amused. But across the near distance of the tea table, the flux of colour in Elsa’s face was softened to a mysterious radiance. “Yes,” he continued, “if you mean that my faith is, that one should say or paint or write—above all, live—life—as he sees and feels it, each man for himself.”

“In the face of the world’s experiences and judgment—?”

“Anything less than conscious and actual knowledge is worse than useless; it tantalizes and confuses.”

Again the circle was narrowing. It was on the cards that Miss Colt’s mind would work with undeviating precision to type. “So a child is to be allowed to burn its fingers because in its ignorance it does not know what some one else could tell it?”

"One day or another, if it has imagination, or a sense of adventure, in short if it has sensibilities to be hurt, it would venture a finger in the flame for itself." Biran leaned forward, including both sisters in his look. "Here's Miss Elsa, for instance." There was subtle, poignant promise in his look, from which she did not shrink, even if her eyes did not meet his halfway. "I should say that it was not quite worthy of her, if she were to choose the lesser part,—let the fear of pain and discomfort—your example of the burned finger is very good—cheat her of great benefits only to be won at the price of pain known and endured."

Miss Colt put down her cup precipitately. It was as though she had been sharply halted in mid-career. And it was Elsa's eyes that suddenly flamed with discreet amusement. She had herself so often felt the way Harriet looked; while now it gave her a sensation of exhilaration, as of a freshening breeze blowing through a room. Biran continued with equanimity. "Unless all signs fail, Miss Elsa is of the elect who owe it to themselves and the world not to be afraid. She can, of course, if she chooses, keep her hands behind her back, as it were. But one learns much in the moment one feels the heat and pain of the flame. And because Miss Elsa will be an artist she will not, any the less, be all that is womanly and lovely and desirable in a woman." Was there a warning in his words to Miss Colt? a reassurance, perhaps; as he read in the girl's eyes a new fearlessness, a new eagerness, it might almost be.

Dazed, as by a light flashed suddenly before her eyes, Miss Colt perceived there was subtle conclusion in the words that came with such assurance, so pleasantly, from Biran's lips. She hardly dared believe that she read

the conclusion aright—a single idea suspended in space—all lesser comprehensions fled. So—there it was—the cloven hoof. Almost against her will she gave voice to the thought thundering in her ears. “But—if you do not believe in marriage—” Then she realized there had been no question, no suggestion of any such thing in Biran’s words. Her self-consciousness grew, threatened to swamp her, confusing words and thought, leaving her helpless at the mercy of this man’s quiet smile. She all but gathered her skirts about her ankles, prepared for instant flight. Distressfully conscious of the presence of Elsa, quietly listening, she had the brief drowning thought that there *was* something demoralizing in the atmosphere of the studio, that she, Harriet Colt, should have entered into such a discussion with a man. But none the less she was aware of a mental stimulation. And it somewhat lulled into abeyance her feeling of guilty responsibility in regard to the listening Elsa. She took up her cup again, and Biran offered her a biscuit.

“Not very greatly in the outward trappings of marriage—no.”

Miss Colt remained speechless even of her accustomed preliminary “But—”.

“I believe in love, supremely.

“And for the artist it is perhaps the greatest need of his existence. He becomes greedy, too grasping, perhaps . . . but he needs it more and can actually profit by it less, than can others upon whom there is no greater claim than that of love, as there is upon the artist, who is under the driving necessity of his talent. That is why—although I did not say so—an artist seldom makes a success of marriage.” His look was as frank as his

words; but he gave Miss Colt no time for clever discriminations,—whether it was manners or morals he was disregarding. “The fact of marriage obscures, whereas love inspires, the paramount reality of creative ardour; the need to live more intensely, to take more largely and to give more generously. Under the double exactions of love and marriage, the emotions all too soon wear threadbare, become slack, like a rubber band out of which all the elasticity has gone. And, above all, the artist must retain his responsiveness, if he is to remain an artist. Love is stimulating; while the ordinary marriage relation is hardly more than a mutual compact not to probe too deeply, ‘Lest we lose our Edens,’ you know. And of necessity an artist’s chief concern is with the realities.”

Miss Colt smiled. She even made allowances for the artist’s enthusiasm; in cold reason, it was so obvious that marriage *was* the reality—she held tenaciously to the fundamental fact as she saw it; but this other, at least, was a point on which she could safely take issue.—Most certainly the world expected something different from its artists, something more of illusion; but, after all, should artistic license excuse a multitude of purely human shortcomings? why, then, the artist’s gift of imagination, of intuition? Having spoken, she folded her hands, and waited.

Biran said gently: “Dear lady, yes. But to conceive the ideal one must know the real. ‘If you would climb a tree you must grasp the branches, not the blossoms.’ It is quite true that the world does not demand its full due from the hands that give it bread. But the heart of the true artist is not of stone, and it is his heart such an artist gives to the world.” He was looking now

straight into Elsa's strangely comprehending eyes. "—That is why I think it will be a woman whom life will one day fashion to be the perfect instrument. Life is harder for a woman than for a man. It will try her on more sides, demand more of her, yield her more. For when a woman discovers the true sources of her life, the springs are deeper, flow more abundantly. And in her double rôle of woman and artist, in her temperamental expression of herself,—as we were saying,—such a woman and such an artist will be irresistible."

Appreciative of the fine phrases, Miss Colt was yet not intimidated by them. "And what of the woman herself? for you will concede that such women win success at the price of their personal life."

Biran asked, "You mean, of course, her life as a wife and mother?"

Miss Colt would not have put it so baldly; but it would have been a waste of opportunity to have discussed nothing more than the weather with Theodore Biran. His pre-eminence gave him warrant to his opinions. Besides, the whole episode of these discussions had nothing in common with the habits of her life or thought. She regarded Biran's peculiar ideas as she might have looked upon the queer customs of a strange land through which she journeyed. And Biran, nothing loath, took the opportunity thus offered him. Sooner or later, he would have to teach Elsa the alphabet, that she might read for herself. "You see, the woman and artist of whom I speak inevitably would be a wife in fact to the man she loved; and if it was her destiny—a mother; but her soul as well as her body would renew life in the world." Biran had scarcely altered his look, but it was to Elsa his words spoke, giving

wings to her soul, new knowledge to her body. "Such a woman will have known the whole range of human experience and emotion. Every joy and sorrow in the world will have added its note to her voice. But she will have had to descend to the deepest depths, and to climb to the steepest heights. It takes an intrepid heart to do that, and a steadfast soul, and fear only of fear that might turn her back from the closed doors she must open with her own hands, to enter; and for a long and weary time she will not know if the presence at her side is of sorrow or of joy." He turned to Elsa suddenly. "Does the prospect frighten you?" Once before he had seen that look in her face, as of her older self, of the woman in the girl; the day he had first played to her. Unabashed by her sister's alarmed eyes upon her, she was seeking to fathom all the meaning of his words. And it was Biran who relieved the sudden tension by speaking some irrelevant phrase. For the few moments longer that they remained around the tea table, he continued to speak of matters trivial and indifferent; and parting from the sisters at the door of the lift where he had ceremoniously accompanied them, Biran returned to the studio with the distinct satisfaction one experiences from the knowledge of something accomplished, or at least set in motion of accomplishment.

As it happened, there were no more discussions around the tea table. Adroitly, Biran had mollified Miss Colt, reassured her in her first reassuring opinion of him; and within a few days he found himself looking properly grieved at the announcement of her impending departure.

At the end of the fortnight, Miss Colt returned home,

alone. There had been no scene, either with Elsa or with Biran. Elsa had simply said she would not go back, would not abandon her hope of a career; and avowed herself prepared to stand by the consequences of her refusal, if Harriet made trouble at home. But Miss Colt neither threatened nor pleaded. It might be she still thought the last word remained with the family, who could simply refuse to send Elsa money, and so compel her return, or she might simply have taken Elsa at her word, and perhaps in secret even sympathized with her. At all events, she said good-bye to her with all possible calm and kindness; it might be not unmixed with regret. It was an interesting life. One met interesting persons, and had pleasant converse with them. She understood Elsa's desire to remain; but she had taken her sister's word that she would change her lodgings at once.

Eager, slowly smiling, youthful—Elsa's face dwelt in her thoughts. Of course, in a few months, Elsa must come home. It would not do, that sort of thing, for too long. She must return and make a place for herself among her own people. She could do very well for herself. She would meet the right people at the Eltons', where she would now be a welcome guest, instead of merely a silent, unsmiling pupil. As for her music—and it seemed there really was something in her playing—it would give her a certain distinction; and there was the prestige of having studied with Zelinski. Surely Elsa ought to do very well for herself. . . .

It came to Miss Colt presently that she would not mention to her family the irregularity of Elsa's arrangements. She thought she came to the decision during the three days of her journey; when she carefully

took everything into consideration,—the palliating fact of Elsa's ignorance of her equivocal position, the extraordinary circumstances themselves, above all that no harm had been done; but in reality Miss Colt had felt the salt sea air fresh in her nostrils.

She made no acquaintances on the return journey, feeling it would be something of an anti-climax. The barren country slipping past the coach windows offered no distraction to her thoughts. And hour after hour she watched the flat, bare land pass under her eyes, fade into the distance, yet never left behind, stretching as far as eye could see, bleak and monotonous before her.

Returned to the family circle, and according to the family wont, briefly, Miss Colt gave report of her visit. Her conversation with Herr Zelinski she recounted word for word. It appeared the master was pleased with Elsa, and spoke encouragingly of her future. And Elsa herself was stouter, was looking very well. For the rest, she must have added a recommendation, because Elsa's next cheque from home was larger by ten dollars; and her father wrote to her that she could hereafter count on the same amount. The change of address that Elsa's letter of acknowledgment mentioned, caused no particular comment. And Miss Colt having spoken of the child's being prettier than when she left home, her mother wrote asking for a photograph; and in due time, framed and conspicuous, the photograph, a very good one of Elsa, graced the centre table in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER X

ELSA'S change of habitation was accomplished without event. Quietly, without a word to Biran, she moved herself and her trunk into a little ugly room, up three flights of stairs, nor did she communicate with him at once thereafter. Perhaps she was afraid of the artist's amused smile. She did not know what to say to him, what not to say. She had not seen Biran alone during the weeks of her sister's visit, and another ten days passed, until the day when she knew he was waiting for her in the ugly crowded parlour where she now had to receive him. Descending the three flights of stairs, she could not quite repress the little furtive smile on her lips, although she descended slowly, in anticipation and hesitation, of the impending meeting. And held bravely in her left hand was the necklace. It was her first opportunity, and she meant to return the chain to him, to presume he had merely lent it to her. The inspiration had come to her as the solution of her problem.

In the first flush of her new independence, it had seemed a very easy, the perfectly natural thing to do. The resolve had given her countenance when his card had been handed in at her door, and she knew him waiting for her to come to him. It may be there was even a touch of braggadocio in her spirit, a little vaunting sophistication in her resolve to return the necklace. All these last few days she had been conscious of a feeling of adventure. In the large, luxurious rooms of his pro-

viding, she had always had a sense of Biran's influence over her; she had never wanted to say "no" to him, but she had felt the constraint of his will; now she almost wanted an opportunity to say "no" to him. She heartily disliked the room up three flights of stairs and the ugly, smoky outlook from the window; but in the sordid detail of bargaining for coals with her landlady, she had suddenly come into a consciousness of her own identity. And she came into the room where she knew Biran was waiting, with a quick directness wholly unlike her usual inconspicuous entrances into his presence.

But seated opposite each other in the stiff-backed chairs, Biran did not even lift his eyebrows at the hideous room. Elsa had expected remonstrances, questions, had feared his sarcasm. None came. Receiving Elsa's note from her new lodgings, he immediately recognized the sister's hand in the matter. But he had always meant to leave Elsa quite free. It augured well for her that she could come to a decision, and act upon it, without delay of discussion. He merely asked, "Are you comfortable here?"

But Elsa's little vaunting spirit had already fled, leaving her to face Biran, abandoning her to the mercy of his voice, his eyes, the imperceptible smile. Her every sensation concentrated itself in the hand holding the necklace. It seemed to her that the next instant he must discover her predicament, look at her hand, divine what it held. Biran continued to make conversation. And presently her courage revived. But under his quiet acceptance of it, her little essay in independence died of itself. But he seemed to demand of her that she abide by her act, and she even made a little story of her experiences with shrewish landladies. They laughed together

over her tale that she had to make a table of her trunk, because there was not space for both in the tiny room. Yet all the time the impress of the necklace into her palm did not let her forget that the moment was yet to come. . . .

Then Biran had risen, was saying good-bye. Suddenly, Elsa opened her hand and held out the necklace to him. When he did not take it from her, in hot shame, she forced a word or two to her lips; and he heard that she was very grateful to him, but that she could not keep the necklace, that she asked him to take it back. Still he made no motion to take the chain from her extended hand. For a moment he wavered between amusement and annoyance. He was not a man of much forbearance. He had appreciated the girl's change of lodgment, but this *gaucherie* of the necklace almost moved him to take her at her word. He was not a patient man with women. Of a passionate temperament, he was yet strangely impersonal in his relations with them. And just now Elsa all but repelled him. He felt no compassion for her distress. For the moment they confronted each other he was thinking that strong emotion was not becoming to the girl. It left her drained; there was even a foreshadowing of the older sister about her mouth; a look of repression rather than of expression; and he had no doubt it was again the meddling hand of Miss Colt, and that the necklace was being returned to him according to rule of convention. He regarded Elsa without any personal feeling. After all, his interest in her had never been more than fleeting, a moment now and then . . . and emotion that made a woman's face look like a locked mask was not promising to the end with which his interest in the girl was con-

cerned. Emotion was to stimulate, to awaken, not to congeal expression at its sources. And it appeared that to the girl Elsa the sterner emotions were not the fruitful emotions. Some women lost beauty, gained strength, under the stress of life. Was she merely too young, or too fluid, to take the sterner mould? It was true, there had been moments when emotion rendered her almost beautiful. And unknown to himself Biran had taken to watching for those moments; but there was no trace of beauty in the girl's face now.

His silence drove Elsa to rapid speech. She was impelled to justify herself before him, although he had said no word to accuse her, had spoken no word at all. And all she had not meant to say, to the very last thought in her mind, was plain for him to see in her agonizing eyes. But she had been more nearly right when she thought he had given her the necklace in much the same spirit that he chose the colour of the shades for the candles on his dinner table. "—I didn't understand about the hat, and other things—not even when you gave me the necklace—I didn't understand."

At last Biran said, "What didn't you understand?" He stood looking down at her, while like a vivifying flame self-consciousness made her again intensely a creature of flesh and blood, conscious to her very finger-tips of the man's look upon her. "What was it you did not understand?" It seemed the necklace had served him better than he had intended, after all; he had quite forgotten it; but now he remembered that her skin had been soft and warm under his touch; and that he had kissed her.

Elsa's outstretched hand fell slowly to her side. She stepped back from Biran, and put the necklace from her,

on a table standing nearby. It lay there in a little glittering heap; but she had had to give her eyes to Biran; and the significance was gone from the mere thing of gold and jewels. She might return the necklace, he might even take it back; but nothing could take from her what he had given her with the gift of the necklace. It had lain warm in her girl's breast for all those days and as many nights. . . .

"You mean—because I kissed you?"

Biran's arm around her shoulders drew her to him, and he felt her become suddenly vibrant, like a violin string responding to the touch of the master; then he released her, released her rather abruptly, almost pushed her from him. But shame had become tremulous joy in Elsa's heart, and if she were still fearful lest he read her eyes, she was strangely tranquil.—As for the necklace, when he was going, Biran took it from the table and dropped it out of sight into his pocket. Then the door closed on him, and Elsa returned up the three flights of stairs to her room, whence all the dreariness and dinginess had fled.

The days passed, a week, two weeks; and the routine of Elsa's life had taken on the unadorned, Spartan lines of her bare little room. There were no more long hours of dreaming idleness before the dancing flames of an open fire. The tiny stove that was not always aglow with warmth did not tempt one so often to put off the hour's work. But one dreamed dreams, none the less. In these days of frugality, without distraction from the single purpose of her work, she learned to look into the future, to picture long, dreamful days under open skies, when one could be—just happy, and maybe—not quite—unbeautiful, nor quite—alone. There were

passing moods of belligerence, as well—hours when all her youth was in revolt and she felt the warming blood in her veins. Hours when she hated the driving necessity, called it fiddling, and hated the hideous room and the violin that kept her a prisoner when heart and body and soul longed to be free. There were sudden heart-clutching thoughts . . . if to be an artist meant always to work, always to be alone . . . who wanted fame and applause on such terms?

The day came when Elsa understood she was waiting. But she could not say why, or for what, she waited. Every night she went to sleep thinking of the morning, and every morning she wakened anticipating the coming day. She was having longer lessons with Zelinski; the taskmaster had become the true master; and Elsa, doubly on her mettle, gave herself to the music. Herr Zelinski communicated his satisfaction to Biran. He admitted he had been mistaken when he despaired that the Fräulein was of wood. He said to Biran that her future was in her own hands. And the young lady herself was a transformed being. His friend Biran should see for himself. So Biran came the next day while Elsa was at her lesson, to hear, and see, for himself. Apparently his judgment was to be vindicated. Unaware of his presence, Elsa had played very well indeed. Zelinski was openly enthusiastic. But when Biran let her return home alone, he was not thinking of Elsa's talent for making music.

He spent that evening alone at the studio. The afternoon had been strangely disquieting; for while he listened to her playing he had caught himself thinking of the girl Elsa as a woman in his own life. Contrary to Miss Colt's belief, he had not, primarily, interested

himself in Elsa because she was a woman-creature, and young, and therefore presumably to his man's liking. He had regarded her very much as he might have regarded a piece of marble that enclosed in itself the wonderful thing his hands were to charm into visible being. For without her genius for music the girl could not have escaped the obscurity of mediocrity. He no longer had any doubt of her talent, and now he knew there was spirit as well; and that it lay in his power, by the touch of his hand, by a look, or a silence, to kindle the little spark into flame.

And he believed that the artist could only learn his art by giving himself to life. He meant that the girl Elsa should be an artist. Her woman's body and soul were to be the tools whereby the soul of the artist should be fashioned. He was not a man who hesitated; and if once he had held back his hand, had not given the awakening touch, it was for fear that the sudden flame sweeping the body would consume the slower flame of the soul. And once he had kissed her, lightly, not too seriously, and had come away, all but forgetting it. A pretty girl with pretty shoulders, whom the unwonted wine of an exciting evening had flushed and warmed with pleasure, and whom he had taken it upon himself to awaken into conscious life, to the sole end that she might grow to the stature of an artist. . . .

But tonight, keeping vigil alone, he thought of all the times he had not kissed Elsa,—of that day in the ugly parlour when he held her for an instant in his arms; of the day in the studio when Elsa had been beautiful, standing before him with a lighted match—and he had not kissed her. Something had held his hand; and tonight, above all else, he was glad the kiss was yet to

be given. For to have kissed her then, all those other times, would have been the act of a cave man.

The flame of his cigarette glowed suddenly, grew brighter, became dim.

. . . Was it that he in his turn wanted something she had, from this girl? In the weeks since he had last heard her play, a deeper, subtly appealing note had crept into her music. But Biran scarcely gave a thought to her playing. The thought in his eyes was of the girl Elsa herself, with her reserve of lowered lashes that intrigued a man's imagination. His glance wandered to the tea table, passed on to the straight-backed chair. A slow smile came to his lips as he flicked the ash from his cigarette. What a little puritan she was, after all! Slowly his arm went out, lay along the pile of silk cushions massed on the divan; then slowly closed about their yielding softness.

Biran did not see Elsa again until the following week, when he went to Zelinski's and detained her after the lesson, in consultation with the master. They had spoken of it before, that Elsa was to play to a group of his friends; and now, quiet and silent, she acquiesced in all their decisions, until Biran was moved to be a little peremptory with her. Did she, or did she not, want to become a musician, an artist? That he as suddenly relented did not allay his impatience, however. But his irritation had more to do with his own state of mind than with this girl who, it seemed, was the last person in the world to move him; a strange, silent girl whose only claim upon his interest was his quixotic concern for her artistic future. . . .

They chose a day three weeks hence for the "*musicale*

intime"; and Biran waited for Elsa to put up her music. Outside Zelinski's door, for just an instant, he hesitated; then turned their footsteps in the direction of Elsa's lodging, where presently he left her with the most formal of farewells. He had, however, in the course of their almost silent walk, spoken of being busy at the studio. But in any case it would not have occurred to Elsa to be more exacting, to expect more from Biran than she received. As the days passed, it was but natural she should experience a growing uneasiness at the prospect of her first public appearance. At all events the anticipation of the day would have explained sufficiently her feeling of weary restlessness. She worked hard, faithfully. She spared no pains in preparing herself for the musicale; some days before the day she was already note-perfect. And if he did not ask her to come to the studio, Biran did not neglect her. Often now he came to Zelinski's in time to walk home with her. But he did not again come to see her in the ugly parlour. And the evening of the musicale he sent his motor for her. He could not, on this occasion, as he had once before, leave his guests to welcome themselves. He had asked some important persons to hear Elsa play; and when the time came it was her accompanist who opened the door from an adjoining room, and revealed Elsa to the little group of Biran's friends gathered at the far end of the studio. She advanced towards the piano slowly, carrying her violin, and Biran wondered at her ease, her unconstraint, as she took her place, and waited for the accompanist, who was to play the opening number with her, to arrange the music.

Biran and Zelinski stood together. The excitable little master had left his seat almost immediately after

sitting down, and Biran had joined him, standing a little apart from his guests. It irritated him that he could not eliminate from the range of his vision the obscuring heads. Again and again Miss Noreen's head and shoulders intervened between him and Elsa. He moved; and now it was the broad back and sleek head of young Van-Smythe that met his look. Then he resigned himself, no longer trying to peer between and around the intruding heads. He could hear very well as it was; could sense the proud satisfaction in Zelinski's short, quick breathing. Zelinski had said, as though it were a thing of his own discovering . . . he had spoken of the girl's having a heart. . . .

Elsa was wearing the white evening dress, and the wreath of tiny white roses in her hair. Biran glanced at his program. She was playing the last number before the intermission. Her head drooping a little over the violin, it seemed almost as though they were murmuring confidences together. Zelinski made an abrupt gesture. "—If only she was not a woman," he whispered to Biran, impatiently, regretfully.

Biran was moved to smile. His eyes narrowed on Elsa's face, visible to him for a moment, as he answered, "Perhaps it is her woman's soul that is her genius."

Elsa had turned slightly, compelled it might be by the fixed attention of the two men, without being actually aware of it, until her tall slenderness was in silhouette against the dark wall. To Biran's eyes she looked pure spirit for the moment. Then something suggested, unexpressed, in the girl's music entangled itself in his thoughts. A woman's soul, he had said. But Zelinski was whispering again. He was obviously disturbed, trying to reassure himself. "But it is her woman's heart

that is the woman. Zat is why one cannot say about a woman. Sometime I think a woman knows only how to love; zey are like an instrument with one string only; it is only ze heart that answers with a full chord."

Biran remained silent. His eyes on her face, where the lowered lashes touched the faint warmth of her cheeks, he had spoken to Zelinski of her woman's soul,—this girl who had melted into the hollow of his arm,—and he knew, although he could not see beneath the lowered lashes, that strange, uncomprehended dreams disturbed the girl-eyes. Then, once again, directly in the line of his vision, he was confronted by the broad shoulders, the sleek head, of VanSmythe; and he came to himself with a start. He would have said the day was long past when he could lose himself in contemplation of a woman's soul. But today Elsa was beautiful again, with an almost wistful youthfulness. It was then Biran answered the master. "When a woman's heart has learned all that love can teach her, one string is enough, if it gives forth the full chord."

Zelinski shrugged his withered shoulders. "When a woman loves, my friend, she has no loneliness for ze music."

The *Liebesträum* ended in a hushed note. Slowly, lingeringly, as though reluctant to yield her dream, Elsa still held the violin poised. Then she looked up. Across the sea of faces her glance was unerring, and she met Biran's eyes looking at her. The next instant the flood of talk and congratulations broke about them; and it was Herr Zelinski who rescued Elsa, and went with her to the inner room. He was concealing his pride as best he might under a prodigious frown; while Elsa, glad not to have to talk just then, sat mutely by, her eyes on

the closed door. When it was time for her to play again, she accepted the violin from Zelinski's hands and passed quietly before him, to take her place. And in the second before she raised her bow, Biran saw the foremost critic of the day come suddenly forth from his detachment. There was hushed expectancy in every face and attitude. Then, inexplicably, Biran felt a sudden fear. A change, subtle, unmistakable, had come over Elsa. It was in the look she did not raise to the waiting group, in her slightly weary pose, as she stood by the piano. Biran had known it to happen before, that a singer had lost her voice from stage fright before her last solo; but it did not seem that Elsa was afraid. She seemed very sure of herself; but fear had gripped Biran, was communicated to Zelinski. Close by his elbow, Zelinski was whispering rapidly, unintelligibly.

There were two more numbers on the program; and Elsa played them perfectly, mechanically; played them with her fingers, as Zelinski whispered bitterly to Biran; played them wonderfully, but it had been better if she had not played them at all. The critic, stroking his chin, looked across at Biran with a quizzical question in his eyes. And when it was all over, and the few persons among the guests whom Elsa knew gathered around her, hiding her from Biran, he left his place by the wall. The critic said no word, but Biran saw him stop to speak with Elsa; then the critic and Zelinski went off together. Biran himself did not cross the room to her. Apparently, only Zelinski, and the critic, and himself, had noticed anything amiss. Yet it was borne in upon him presently as he mingled among his guests, that they were all saying the same thing, in monotonous reiteration. A lesser critic whose judgment was like-

wise not to be despised, had said it critically, generously. The women spoke it prettily, and with meaning. Miss Noreen came to him directly after speaking with Elsa. She was one of the few women, Biran knew, who could be generous to a younger woman. But even Miss Noreen did not seem to take it quite seriously. She was frank in her praise; but it was of the girl she spoke, not of her playing. "She is charming, but I have told you that before." And in her eyes, as in all the other eyes, Biran saw that she gave him credit for at least an equal discrimination. He was known for a fastidiousness that was almost disdain. The girl was too pretty, too piquant, to be taken for granted. Their eyes on Elsa, Miss Noreen said, "Mr. Stornton prophesies a future for her. She is very young, isn't she?" Her smile was kind, but Biran caught himself looking at the tiny wrinkles radiating from her eyes. Strange he had not noticed them before. . . . "And if she can play now as she played tonight, when she is a little older, a little wiser—for it is the price we all pay—our dreams in exchange for reality—what can we not expect of her!"—When she had lost her charm of youth, Biran translated it to himself, and became like all these other women, whose surface glitter scarce sufficed to mask their hard triviality.

"She is preparing to be a professional?"

"Zelinski says that being a woman is against her."

They smiled at that,—Biran into the eyes of the beautiful, brilliant woman and the great actress. He had not known Noreen in the days when her eyes too must still have known dreams; the years had already passed that had made her the supreme artist she was, when they became friends; and they had never spoken

of her past; but small doubt that her youth had been sold dearly, dream by dream, illusion by illusion; for the reality of the woman she was now. Biran turned and looked at her. "Are you a happy woman?" He had himself lived his days to the same end of knowledge and expression. He had feared neither the joy nor the sorrow of life. If he had given himself to life, he too had received much from life.

Miss Noreen showed no surprise at his abrupt question. She answered simply, "No." And in the back of his mind Biran was wondering if the girl Elsa expected happiness. Miss Noreen was smiling her farewells. . . .

Because she did not quite know what to do, Elsa had followed the last group of guests into the retiring-room, and remained there putting on her wraps. She was suddenly very tired, and the nervous fear she had not felt while she stood playing before all those strange persons now overcame her when she was alone in the little quiet room. Strangely enough, without giving the young man a thought, she paled and flushed, remembering the look in VanSmythe's eyes as he held her hand to say good-night. Then she heard some one moving in the studio, and as her glance flew to the door it opened to admit Biran. He had waited for Elsa to return to the other room, now that it was empty of all the talk and flutter; he had certainly not expected to find her cloaked and veiled. "Going already?" he asked; and in the voice of any other man it would have been the note of self-consciousness.

The blood pulsed slowly back into Elsa's heart. She fastened the last button of her coat, stood ready to go, passed before Biran into the studio. Her violin lay on

the piano, and she picked it up and laid it away in the case Biran held open for her, snapped shut the clasps, relinquished the case into his hands, all in an unbroken silence, as though they were acting a pantomime. A bit of her slender white throat was visible above the dark line of her coat. And half-smiling, half-questioning, Biran's look lost itself in her eyes. He forgot her music, forgot the very word of her talent, and that he had been wont to think of her as material malleable to his hand. For the moment, she was to him, above all, that mysterious thing beyond compare, a girl-creature grown suddenly lovely and desirable, with all that man desires in woman. For tonight—now—she was beautiful again. But he checked his impulse with a will stronger than his desire. He only said, "I want to thank you for playing—and playing so well." He spoke mechanically; not thinking of his words at all; thinking only that this girl had a right to demand her full share of its spoils from life; and had he not vowed her to life, and to all knowledge? Did he not owe her full measure of life? . . . He continued speaking of the music because he was a little afraid of silence, afraid of Elsa, of himself. "I am sure now—that some day you will play so well that all the world will stop to listen." More shaken than he would admit to himself, he grew aware of Elsa's darkening eyes in the white isolation of her face, and that she looked suddenly very tired. For the first time in his life, he felt an ache of loneliness in his arms; they were alone in the place; alone in the world—if so it was to be; then he found himself holding the crowding thought at bay. He still held her eyes, but the girl herself seemed to draw farther and farther away, and he knew suddenly there was not that, not yet, in her eyes which

would have given him his man's right over the woman who gives herself. . . . After all, he was not a cave man. She had her woman's right to choose, as well as to be chosen.

He moved away from her, touched the bell to summon his man; and without waiting for him opened the outer door of the studio. Elsa had not put on her gloves; they were pendant in her hand; and helping her into the motor, Biran felt her fingers were like ice. So he kept her hand in his until presently he felt the warmth creeping back into it. The sudden look of fatigue had passed from her face; once a passing light revealed her profile to him; she was looking out upon the phantom of the night streets; and Biran asked, "What do you see out of that window?" She looked around with a little start. "And what were you thinking about this evening, when you forgot all those people listening to you?" Like a child holding its secret in its hands behind its back, she seemed to draw away from him; and following swiftly upon the slight withdrawal was instant fright. "It was as if the music played itself." Biran spoke gently, thinking how lovely she had looked—wistful and young.

He felt her turn towards him in the darkness. She had understood at once. "That is what Herr Zelinski calls—playing with the fingers." After a moment she added, "It is like that—when I feel too much—Herr Zelinski says I do not feel enough."

"And yet Zelinski suspects you of having a heart."

Her hands were quite still in his, and it seemed she had nothing to answer. Biran asked again, "Well—and of what were you thinking?"

She answered simply, "I was thinking—of that day

in the other studio—just before everything was finished and I put up the curtains wrong—and you had to help me do them all over again—and I was glad I made a mistake—because I couldn't bear to think there was nothing more to do. And when we'd put up the curtains again, you said, 'There, it's all done—' and it was like the end of everything—”

Biran did not laugh. “Do you not like—the studio here?”

“I feel like a stranger there.”

“Elsa—not with me.”

If she had made the slightest movement from him, Biran must have taken her into his arms. But she did not even try now to release her hand. And Biran himself put it away from him. A moment later they drew up to the curb. For an instant, Biran hesitated at the street door. He almost let Elsa go from him into the dark hall alone; then he entered with her, went with her up the three flights of stairs, side by side with her, her arm in his.

Her door was the third from the landing. . . .

At the door, she stopped and held out her hand for the violin. And Biran unlocked the door. The room beyond the opened door was dark; the hallway was barely lighted by a single gas jet; in the doorway, Elsa was merely a vague blur, dark upon darkness.

“Good-night.”

“Good-night.” Her hand lay in his for the briefest moment. Biran turned away before Elsa closed the door. He thought he could not have turned and gone away, seeing her shut into the darkness and solitude of the room that he imagined in all its bare loneliness.

But he heard the door close before he reached the landing; and he waited until he saw a thin thread of light through the crack. Then he went quickly down the stairs, into the night.

CHAPTER XI

THE morning post brought Biran a note from the critic whose word was law in matters musical. He had already, in the critic's column of the newspaper, read the item, guardedly favourable, which spoke of the musicale and of the young violinist. The note simply repeated the few lines of the newspaper notice, but in his capacity of Biran's friend, the critic had added a personal word. "The girl is an empty vessel so far; the sounds she emits are merely the echo of other sounds; give her something of her own to say. It's quite possible she will say it admirably; which will be a feather in your cap; at all events, I hope the very pretty young woman will have wit enough to take advantage of her opportunities." That was all; but Biran had been regarding the note for a long time, in a sort of gnawing fury. It may not have been intentional, but it was impudence on the part of the critic, none the less, to concern himself with matters that did not in the slightest concern him. . . .

He was expecting Elsa at the studio that afternoon. Presently he heard the outer door open, and close, and he looked at the clock; but it was young VanSmythe whom his man admitted. Biran greeted him not too cordially. He liked the young man, but just now he did not want to talk to him. In short, VanSmythe's entrance upon his thoughts just then was an intrusion. Biran was not noted for his consideration of the feelings

of others, and he sat looking at his visitor as if waiting for him to realize that he was intruding, and be off. But VanSmythe was too engrossed in his own preoccupation to give heed to the other man's. Biran had not suggested that he sit down, but in any event he would have declined a chair. He looked down at Biran across the little space that divided his height from the other's reclining position in the long chair. "I want to speak to you about Miss Colt," he said directly.

Biran had had a premonition that it was about Elsa that the young man had come to him. "What about Miss Colt?" His quiet, almost amused voice put too great a strain upon the young man's hardly maintained self-control. VanSmythe spoke the thought in his mind, in a level voice, but with his whole heart in the words. "Are you going to marry her?" Biran did not alter his lounging position. His expression remained unchanged. He let the young man continue. "Because I want to marry her."

In a word, VanSmythe was demanding to know his, Biran's, intentions regarding Elsa. Biran drew himself up a little straighter in the chair, even threw away his cigarette. It was preposterous, of course, yet the fact remained that marriage with young VanSmythe assured a future no girl could afford lightly to dismiss. But Elsa and VanSmythe . . . ! yet why was it preposterous? Biran had not been unaware of the young man's interest in her. He was not in the least surprised that VanSmythe wanted to marry her. "My dear fellow, it is out of the question."

"Why?" VanSmythe did not put it into words,—why, in heaven's name, should it be out of the question?

"Miss Colt is looking forward to an artistic career."

"Rot." The young man dismissed it without the bat of an eye. Biran laughed. He could understand that VanSmythe did not care a rap for the girl's artistic career. He could see plainly enough that he wanted to marry Elsa for the simple and adequate reasons for which any man wants to marry a girl who moves him to thoughts of marriage. But he, Biran, had not saved Elsa from the death-in-life existence of her native town and her prosperous suitor, to turn her over to the first likely chap who happened along. He answered, kindly enough, "Miss Colt has no intention of marrying—any one—for some time to come, I should say. She is preparing for a professional career. You seem to forget, she has a future to look forward to, the interesting future of a charming and talented woman. You would hardly expect her to think of marriage, under the circumstances."

VanSmythe met it instantly. "If a girl loves a man she wouldn't give him up for all the careers in the world."

"Does Miss Colt—love you?"

For the instant that the eyes of the two men met Biran had an ugly thought of all the ages when men fought for the possession of woman. Here they were, he and another man, almost baring their teeth over a girl who was not to have a word to say for herself. And the other man was young, ardent, determined. . . . Then VanSmythe asked, "Is she—not free—to marry me?"

Biran met his eyes, but said nothing.

As under a physical shock, VanSmythe squared his shoulders with a perceptible movement. His hands came out of his pockets; then he thrust them back

again, and turned his face away from Biran. Elsa had refused him her address; that might mean anything or nothing. He was in love with her, but he thought he knew Biran's way with women. He took his hat from the table, and went out of the room.

Biran looked at the clock. Elsa would be coming at any moment now. He lighted a cigarette, rolled it thoughtfully, between finger and thumb, not quite sure of his own state of mind. Life was one continuous round of barter. This for that, that for this; choose and take, or choose and leave. Always one or the other; until fate struck the balance for you; then you either had something to show for your life, or you had not. And the price you paid was little or great, according to the use you made of what the price paid bought for you. Why should not the girl have her chance to pay the price she could command in exchange for the gift of life itself . . . ?

The clock ticked monotonously on. Fragments of a conversation he had once had with his old friend Elton came back to him,—Elton who had spent so lavishly of his soul's substance for the bread of life that he had beggared himself of even a piece of silver wherewith to buy lilies. They had spoken together of a woman's soul, of Elsa's soul. He, Biran, had said Life was only waiting for the world of men to temper the Perfect Instrument, that Life might speak to all men. Somewhere, in some human heart, it was shaping. He had always believed it, long before he had said it to Elton. They had spoken, too, of the hearts of women; and was not love the one royal road to the heart of a woman? And Zelinski had said this girl had a heart. . . .

It came to this then, that he, Biran, would not pro-

vide Elsa as a wife for the first man who fancied he loved her. He had no intention of playing fairy god-mother to Elsa Colt. He had undertaken her emotional education for the distinct purposes of her artistic career, and not as a matrimonial venture. Young Van-Smythe could look elsewhere for a pretty face. The world had other uses for Elsa than those of marriage. He did not deny her charm; why should he? It was an added asset. But his first concern must be for her art, to see that her talent had its chance to come to its full fruition. He owed it to the world, as well as to the girl. It was his discovery, his gift to the world. . . . Shorn of her talent to make beautiful music she would be, in all probability, like any other girl, of no particular interest to Biran. He had known a dozen young women with promising talents; and one or two at least, had had eyes as beautiful as Elsa's. But he had made his bow to them and passed on. . . .

He rose, went to the tea table, looked it over attentively, to see that nothing had been forgotten. Returning, he stopped short of his chair, remained standing in front of the clock. Six minutes to five. . . . Then he sat down on the arm of the chair he had quitted, facing the velvet curtains that shut away the studio from the entrance hall. . . . As for the girl herself, she was not young, and life-eager, and a girl-creature, only because life needed the raw material of her youth and love to shape to its sterner uses. She would claim joy and sorrow as her rightful portion. She would not shirk her destiny as one of the creators of the world; but as a woman, she would demand her just due of life. Her portion was more than the barren joys and sorrows she

would experience in the arms of a young VanSmythe. . . .

Presently, the velvet curtains moved slightly; or he thought they moved. But no one entered. But in the instant that he waited for Elsa to appear between the heavy velvet folds that she would scarcely disturb in passing, Biran knew he was waiting for her, as a man waits for the woman he desires.

Then, as he still sat watching, the curtains swayed apart, and Elsa came into the studio. In the half second while she hesitated by the door, as was her wont, before coming in to him, it flashed across Biran's consciousness in all its illuminating disquietude. . . . Did he—love Elsa? After all these years when he had come to believe that for him the day of loving a woman was forever past, did he love this girl? He had seen her girl's soul rise in her eyes to him. . . . Or was it only her youth, her lips, he desired? And if he did not—love her . . . or if he loved her, why was he waiting the length of the room away from her . . . for what, in heaven's name, was he waiting?

He rose, and courteously made her welcome. A little taken aback by this ceremonious greeting, Elsa went at once to the tea table. Biran had asked her to come to the studio to give him a cup of tea, and the hour being late, she supposed he wanted his tea. Biran followed her and lighted the spirit lamp under the kettle. What would VanSmythe think to see them now, he rather made fun at his own expense,—VanSmythe believing him to be Elsa's lover; while he, Biran, had not so much as touched her hand. Each of them had spoken a single sentence. She had said, "Am I late?" and he had an-

swered her, "When one waits the moments are always laggard." It was no more than he would have said to any gracious lady, coming to give him a cup of tea.

Biran opened the biscuit tin. "Let's see if Wilkes has blundered about the biscuits." They both looked into the tin, and Elsa looked up. "They aren't the kind you like," she said regretfully. With her smile like a fleeting beam of light, she put out her hand for the biscuits, slender, untried girl-hands; and when she spoke again of the biscuits Biran rose precipitately from his chair. The hovering hands irritated him. He knew she wouldn't, but if only she would knock something over, break something. If she would burn her fingers, or upset the cream. . . . But she hung the kettle back on the crane, without mishap. There was nothing for it but to return to the tea table. The tea pot was set aside for a moment, while Elsa looked up at him. "I met Miss Noreen downstairs, and I was to tell you she would look in later."

Biran answered merely "Yes—?" Had she come a few moments earlier, Elsa would have seen VanSmythe also . . . a very few moments earlier, and she would have met him here in the studio. For one black moment there wakened in Biran's heart the instinct of the savage threatened in the possession of his woman. Love her or not, this girl was not for other men to love, this girl whom he had vowed to the world, and had denied to young VanSmythe. Denying her to that other man, had he not, in the same breath, denied her to himself? He knew now that he wanted her, the girl of her, her youth, her freshness, her lips. Her eyes did not deny him. Did she understand . . . ? For beneath all her

reserves and reticences she was a woman and he was a man. . . .

Timidly, Elsa continued speaking of Miss Noreen. "Every time I see Miss Noreen, I can't help wondering why she is—Miss Noreen."

Biran answered absent-mindedly, "That is only her stage name."

Elsa put down the cup she held rather suddenly. "Oh—then perhaps she is—" But she did not finish the sentence, and Biran, comprehending and amused, supplemented, "No, she isn't." Elsa was looking into the tea pot, and Biran was looking at the top of her head. So she too had been thinking thoughts in her little head. He hesitated. He did not want to talk about Miss Noreen. At the moment he did not care a rap if he never saw the beautiful actress again. But he could not say what he wanted to say to Elsa. If he made her look up at him, would he need to say anything? Her hands were halting about the tea things again. No; he must not. . . . Yet, if it was not because he—loved her, why had he let her go from him, alone into her dark room, and shut the door between them, that night after the musicale? Why was he sitting here now, the tea table between them . . . ? Then as suddenly he called himself an unmitigated ass, an idiot. With the grim determination of the vivisector, justified by the ultimate good, he looked into the girl's eyes and spoke the other woman's name. "I quite agree with you that a man would want to marry Miss Noreen." He knew that to Elsa, instinctively, marriage was the only possible relation between a man and a woman, and that she had been thinking of marriage, when she spoke. The cruel wish had suddenly come to

him to hurt her, and she had herself put the weapon into his hands.—All women are jealous, even if they do not love the man.

In the little silence, Elsa gave Biran his tea, offered him biscuits. He took two biscuits, and put down his cup. "It is only—that Miss Noreen has chosen to live her life on terms that do not include marriage." He smiled ever so slightly. She must make what she could of that. As for Elsa, it was not, by now, an entirely new thought; but it must, inevitably, remain a terribly disquieting one. And that Biran's voice, when he spoke thus of Miss Noreen, proved him in entire sympathy with the lovely actress, did not convince nor reassure her.

Biran drank his tea. At all events, it was time Elsa looked upon the world with eyes that saw, not merely dreamed. She must at least know the difference between love and marriage, before she chose to disregard one or the other. Sooner or later she must come to know that there were other than the merely obvious relations in the lives of men and women; that Noreen, for instance, piqued his imagination because he had just missed loving her; but in any case it would never have been a question of marriage with them.—Just as he had had reasons good and sufficient for denying Elsa to young VanSmythe. His own passing whim for her—surely it could be no more than a whim—but made her the safer from him. Could she understand that? It was so simple . . . so almost inevitable . . . that he should lean across the dividing distance of the tea table . . . and all men are savages at bottom, all women their rightful prey.

Elsa had forgotten her tea-making. Something of the

man's leashed turbulence must have found response within her. His very silence compelled her reluctance. Deepening waters of vague comprehensions were creeping up around her. Then Biran took up his cup, and the little play of tea-drinking was resumed. As a matter of fact, they had very few topics in common; when they spoke together, it was because he had something to say, or because Elsa suddenly revealed to him some unexpected, fertile consciousness. He understood she would be concerned with marriage. It was a habit and a tradition with her. They had spoken of it before, would speak of it again. At the moment, he continued speaking of marriage, because the silence was overcharged with many things of which he did not choose to speak. "You see, being an artist is very much the same thing as being married. You are not free, afterwards, to please yourself alone. And the artist-half of you always has the last word. So when an artist marries, it becomes a *menage a trois*. And that is an impossible situation, if the best possible condition for drama." He took another biscuit. "There's Elton. That's marriage."

Suddenly, in a still, small voice, Elsa said, "The Eltons—are happy."

"Presumably they have what they want."

Elsa flushed slightly. She had a sensation that gods were being razed to the ground; and that she was being forced to sound her finger against the hollow pedestals. They spoke no more of Elton. Biran cleared a little space before him on the table. "I have come to believe that unhappiness is the most comprehensive emotion of which man is capable." He took up the extinguisher, smothered the little flame under the kettle, and completed the break in his thought. "No person can live

two lives within the span of one. A divided interest is like two cats sewn up in a sack. They fight, blindly, each for its own life. So it is with the artist who has another duty than that of his art to discharge. Yet, above all men, the artist perhaps has the desire for life and yet more life." He saw Elsa make the effort to compass his thought, saw it come to expression in her eyes. Guileless child that she was, had she not put him in the quandary of one who by possessing himself of what he desires, loses it to himself—? Suddenly aware of shifting sands beneath his feet, he continued talking volubly. "Robbing Peter to pay Paul is to sow a crop from which one can reap only hunger. Two contending forces, the easy satisfactions of the man and the insatiable need of the artist, must turn on each other and rend and demolish, until one is put to rout, or nothing is left of either." He doubled back on his conversational tracks. "And yet, I can conceive of no more reasonable desire or activity on the part of man than the pursuit of happiness."

Yet what was happiness more lasting than the elusive glance of this girl's eyes? Happiness anesthetizes the soul, lulls it to repose. With fulfilment comes the end of productive life, which to the artist means life itself; for the creative soul must forever yearn after something that remains bigger, more dominating, than the soul that seeks to encompass it. What was it Elsa's soul sought through her eyes? Eyes like the surface of a lake, wonderfully, exquisitely reflective, mirroring back his every word and glance. But it was not enough—to feel. Enough for a lover, yes, but not if the girl was to be one of the creators of the world. Such an one must receive only to give back again, a hundred-fold, what he

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has received. And all the time Biran was saying it to himself that he must take nothing from Elsa that he could not give back to her, in greater measure. He had no right to a single glance of her eyes, but to render it back to her, pregnant with a fruitful emotion, that would blossom in her woman's heart, come to fruit in the soul of the artist. There had been moments of swift comprehensions, when the girl had all but come into her heritage of the articulate soul. . . .

In the silence, Biran released her glance. When he spoke again, it was to the potential artist rather than to the girl whose eyes he could not quite fathom. "But it is unhappiness that sensitizes, quickens the soul. Seeking and striving, it attains beyond its own limitations, becomes articulate, renders into terms of common understanding what otherwise would remain forever unexpressed, unshared,—what is in your heart, and mine, and in the hearts of all men,—and that the artist alone can reveal from out the profound dumbness that is the common lot. For he alone has the gift of the articulate soul, the supreme gift, it may be, that life has to give."

A slow anger against Elsa crept into Biran's blood. Was there no warmth in her veins that she could sit there listening to his empty words, her hands folded quietly together on the table between them? Was she of those women who are constitutionally incapable of strong emotion? cold at the very centre of her being, where there should be flame, smouldering, waiting to be fanned into life. Yet there had been moments when he had felt the glow of warmth in her. Was that look in her eyes wonder at him, at his endless stringing of words . . . ?

He could either leave her with that look in her eyes,

or he could forever quench it with his passion. For he knew that the mounting heat in his veins was passion, the desire of the man for the woman who rouses him to desire. Yet something restrained him. Was it that he wanted more from her than he could take for himself? Was he denying himself now in something of the same spirit with which one puts aside the choicest bon-bon to the last? He did not spare himself the bald truth. He was looking forward to her lips as the spoils of the game,—his reward and his disillusionment. A tooth for a tooth, and an eye for an eye—it was inexorable law. With the first kiss she yielded him he would lose all desire for her lips. It was then he left his chair abruptly, crossed the big room, only to return to the tea table. The slow, slightly mocking smile came back to his lips. For if words meant nothing to him, who had known the reality of things, he must not forget that to Elsa they were revelation itself. He could not misinterpret that stilled look in her eyes. It had been impossible for him to fathom her traditional unimaginativeness, and personal simplicity. He could not conceive it, even now. He merely believed it of her. He leaned a little forward in his chair. "It is not such a harsh destiny, to love supremely." . . . If to love were the bread and wine of life, as he knew it to be, why was he so reluctant to hold the cup to her lips, to put the loaf into her hand? Life was fluid in her face even if her eyes admitted nothing, denied nothing. "Last night, when you were playing, it was the one thing lacking in the music you made. It was as if the lamp had not been lighted; one felt and saw, vaguely, what only the light could illumine. You were groping your way among wonderful things all shrouded in darkness. You

knew they were there, and you felt they were beautiful; but that is not enough." Her eyes now were a battleground. Wavering comprehensions came and went. One touch . . . But he held grimly to his purpose. She must at least know to what gods she was a sacrifice. "One might as well try to sing a song whose words one had never heard, as to live life without knowing what gives it meaning. And one first realizes the meaning of life when one loves." The soft grey of twilight more and more obscured the big room. Across the little distance of the tea table the girl's eyes, luminous now as with an inner light, looked back at Biran. With an effort he recalled his thoughts. "We were talking about artists. It is the white flame of love that fuses the life of the artist with the lives around him. It is the one thing he must have in common with all men,—the simple, feeling heart that can ache and rejoice with others because it has ached and rejoiced, supremely, for some one fellow-creature, beloved beyond all others." . . . With her rose-mouth and dreamful eyes, what mattered it to this girl—the tragedy of attainment that robs the heart of its desire? What did she care for all the wisdom of the ages, were it to contradict her heart? Why, in heaven's name, should he not, with a single touch, blot out the knowledge the years had graven on his soul?

So, at last, they looked at each other, the girl who had not yet known love and the man who had known too much of love.

Silence, and the grey of falling night, closed in about them. It brought a chill into the room, crept into the spirit of the man, veiled and made remote from him the girl whose nearness had suddenly become a reality to

him. As from far distances, the thought came to him that for these many months past he had not touched clay; and he looked down at his hands. He felt suddenly, poignantly alone, in this grey world of his fine studio. If some day he should quietly close the door after himself, and go out of life, no one would feel a loss in his going. Across the disarranged table he looked at Elsa, at her hands, quiet, yet strangely sentient, among the tea things she was bringing into order. But he no longer wanted to touch her hand. Her warmth, if she had warmth, could not in that moment have warmed him. He wanted no wanton pleasures, no adventures of passion; none of the mad raptures he had been wont to call love. He wanted what no woman had ever given him, what he had never asked a woman to give him, what he had no right to take for himself from this girl,—a homely hearth, the touch of a little child's hand in his, abiding warmth in his heart, not fire in his veins. He wanted what he had denied to young VanSmythe. . . .

He rose abruptly, flooded the room with light.

"What do you say to having dinner somewhere where there is plenty of light and music, and then the theatre?"

CHAPTER XII

OUT of conceit with all the world, Biran closed his doors to it. But the days passed without any desire to return to his work. The door of the inner room remained locked. For hours at a time he wandered listlessly within the tapestried walls of the studio, smoking endless cigarettes; or he would stand brooding down upon the stream of drab humanity passing under his windows; and the people in the streets touched him no more than did the woven figures on his walls. No one looked up at his windows. There was no reason why he should make the effort and put on his overcoat and descend to mingle among the passing crowds, always passing, even as the thoughts and visions that lingered with him a moment to tantalize, then fled, mocking him.—For a day and a night, perhaps; even yes. But it is like expecting the sun to be mysterious with the wan beauty of the moon, and the moon to scintillate like the stars, to expect one woman to be all things to a man. Biran knew it was temptation, but so long as he knew it for what it was, he could hold the slightly cynical look upon his lips. Deliberately, he had chosen the staff of the wanderer. Satisfaction meant stagnation. Life might offer many restful places, but no place of rest, for the pilgrim upon his way. And he Biran was, first and last, that creature of irreconcilable needs and desires and yearnings who must always be upon the way. He had known the fleeting joy of comrades well-met on

the road; but always there must be that in his heart and soul that bade him be off again. . . . A woman is content with love. She will take the crude material of a man's love and refine it within herself; tending it with tears and laughter until it flowers with the rare blossom of her own soul and imagination. A man is seldom poet enough to do that for love. He demands of woman the full-blown flower of her love. Coming to its perfection in a breath of sudden warmth, he makes it his own in the moment of its greatest beauty and purity.

Night came. At the end of his long days of isolation Biran had taken to wandering about the streets. He walked aimlessly, compelled by a driving need. Was he doomed thus always to go in search of other flowers, other beauty, other moments of joy and completion? Once, suddenly, speaking aloud in the streets he heard his own words, scarcely knowing them for his. "It is destiny—life will have it so." Always he seemed to be looking into the alluring eyes of this girl who had moved a young VanSmythe to thoughts of marriage! So that was the darkened visage that had been stalking his solitude, peering at him out of the faces of the passers-by. In a way it amused him, it was so incongruous among the company of his accustomed thoughts. Yet, very well then, let us argue it, since it threatens to become a question. Unconsciously he squared his shoulders, with a little shrug, half whimsical, half capitulating. After all, he was a man like any other man, and there was certainly nothing very unusual in a man's thinking about a girl, and marriage, and all the rest of it. . . .

He went on slowly, walking stick lax in his hand. "There's Elton. That's marriage. 'Good-morning, my dear.' 'Good-night, my love.' And shall we have

chops for dinner, or a steak?" He could have laughed aloud, only something tightened in his throat. What if he was that queer and irresponsible being, a man with a genius beyond that of his fellows? But the answer came swift and irrefutable. As well hope to find content in a house divided against itself, as for the half-man, the half-artist, to try to live each the life of the other. For if it is the artist who loves, it is the man who marries. Marriage with the woman one loves is too exacting. In the reality of marriage one needs must lose the inspiration of love. And Biran had too long thought of himself as first of all an artist to now quite forget it. He knew well enough that love is a soil that needs constant tending, constant renewing, and that art will not spare a man long from the main business of his life. Perhaps above all men the artist must think first and last of the harvest; harvest that in its turn yielded barren plaudits, and the meaningless praise of strangers, the empty satisfaction of knowing oneself the object of envy to lesser successes; and by some strange irony of fate doomed to walk alone in the midst of a world of men. But equally, of course, it could not be that he loved Elsa, Elsa who, naturally enough, with her neat little bundle of traditions, and her wide eyes and cool lips, solved the whole problem of a man and a woman with the simple words of the marriage ceremony. "I, Elsa, take thee . . ."

Alone under the night sky, alone among all these passing strangers, Biran did not laugh. Unconsciously he uncovered his head; then he laughed, at himself. But the words he had just said were not to be unsaid, were coursing like a swift, warm wine through his veins.

Presently he resumed the argument with himself. No woman could give him all he needed from love,—what he had always called love. He had always loved so; one woman for the charm of her voice that thrilled him; another for her exquisite hands; still another for some other reason; but no one of them all ever possessed all things for him, for all time. "There would be days when I could not live without the beloved woman, but equally there would be days when I would need to forget her off the face of the earth." . . . And the worst of it was that after a while a man would fall into the habit of the morning kiss just as the wife acquired the habit of growing thoughtful over the merits of steak or chops for dinner.

He had once breakfasted with the Eltons. He had seen both the morning kiss, and the thoughtful abstraction of Mrs. Elton's gaze as she accepted it on her cheek. . . .

The streets were all but deserted. Unknowing, Biran had wandered into the region of small shops and dingy lights.

. . . Of course, there was the other way. He summed it up briefly, tritely, irrefutably. Man was not meant to live alone. And a woman had every right to give herself to the man of her choice. It was not a position he needed to justify for himself. One had merely not to shirk any of the conditions. After all, the world's only legitimate concern is with results. And if a man and a woman choose to live their lives so that the world profits thereby, they have repaid their debt for anything they may have taken for themselves. He, Biran, and the girl, Elsa, had at their command coin of pure gold. Had not the artist always, to more than half the spoils

of his freedom, paid the debts of the man? Once he asked himself, Was Elsa part of the debt, he, Biran, owed the world? Or was she his fair share of the spoils of life? He might have won her, man from man. Did he love her, love her at all, for her fair soul or for her alluring eyes—what mattered it—if he loved her?

She had love to give him, and youth, and her virgin lips. And though he might take her love and the sweetness of her girlhood and the first kiss of her lips, he must not keep them as a man could who would make her a wife, a mother, who could keep her for himself. For he had denied her to young VanSmythe. . . .

And her arms around his neck, he must unclasp her fingers. He must put her from him, whether he would or no. He must teach her love only that she might come to know the joy and bitterness of love.

Had he won her, man from man. . . .

But he had irrevocably lost her. Yet he was pledged to withhold nothing from her; and he could make her a great artist. But she was such a child yet, with her reserves and reticences, a man must needs protect her even from his thoughts.

An hour later, Biran let himself into his rooms with his latchkey. He had told his man not to wait. A single light made the rooms seem bigger, more empty, lonelier, as Biran entered them. Always before, returning to the studio he had experienced a feeling of satisfaction; it was the first place he had ever called home. Tonight, the rooms looked to his eyes like some extravagant show-place, without comfort or warmth to solace his loneliness. He turned on the lights, shut the

studio from his sight. Rather grimly he smiled to himself that his hat and overcoat flung on the grand piano was a disorderly habit of their youth that his old friend Elton, under the careful supervision of his wife, must long ago have outgrown. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

IT was Herr Zelinski's idea that Elsa should follow up the success of the musicale at the studio with a public concert. She had acquitted herself on that occasion beyond the expectations of the two men who expected well of her. Perhaps the master wanted to test her mettle, perhaps it was simply pride in his pupil; but Zelinski had set his heart on having his way about the concert. There must be no blatant publicity, but he had means at his disposal to give Elsa an effective introduction to even an indifferent public; nor did he overlook the obvious advantage, in the matter of discreetly rousing curiosity, by linking Theodore Biran's name with hers. More and more, the glittering possibility of a career for Elsa, became a fixed idea with her master. Under his personal supervision, and considering the girl's remarkable ability for applying herself to the business in hand, Zelinski decided that a month's preparation would suffice. And after the concert, he decreed Munich. He would give Elsa a letter to a world-famed master of the violin. Three years of real work, without distraction, and then they would talk of a career. He had understood from his friend Biran that the Fräulein was to have a career—? and thus asked to declare himself, with Elsa's eyes upon him, Biran had answered that the Fräulein was to have a career in so far as it lay in his power to assure it to her. And, in his turn, his eyes holding the girl's, he added that he

looked forward to seeing Miss Elsa proclaimed one of the great artists of her day. Thereupon Zelinski made play with his shoulders; admitted the possibility; and to Elsa named the hour the next day when she was to come to him for the first of the preparatory lessons.

Elsa heard the decision as if it did not concern her. And studying her face for some gleam of a natural excitement, Biran said to himself not so much in derision perhaps as in defence of her unsophistication, "The little bourgeois." Had she no imagination, no spirit of adventure? He had been moved to a certain degree of enthusiasm; even in the faded eyes of Zelinski there lurked a new light of interest. The girl alone seemed unmoved. Was it so small a thing,—this matter of a career, that meant in all probability fame and fortune? But sitting there silent between the two men, there was something in the girl's attitude as though she braced herself against some physical strain put upon her. And parting from Biran at Zelinski's door, she yielded her hand to him with an air of finality, almost of renunciation. For she knew she must not fail . . . and the thought darkening her eyes was of the long weeks, the endless hours of practice, the long, solitary days in the ugly little room; above all, the single word "Munich" hung its black pall over her. Biran would have laughed at her air of destiny, only that he was suddenly aware that he had no desire to laugh. He had not misread the determination in the master's eyes, nor missed the crafty meaning of his questions, nor the irrevocability of his own fateful assurance of a career for Elsa. He asked her abruptly, "Do you not want to be a great violinist, to have the world at your feet?" He waited for some flash of response from her, some sign of interest, that

would somehow justify this thing that it seemed must be—

• “I—I would rather not go away.”

“You will like Munich.”

He was suddenly impatient of his own vacillations. They had no choice in the matter, neither he nor the girl whose strange apathy disquieted, irritated him. He had a lordly way of ignoring obstacles of mere conflicting opinion. One of the secrets of his strength was that he never crossed a bridge before he came to it. After all, even Munich did not spell the end of all things, as the girl's eyes seemed to vision it. He smiled then, in a curious little shame of relief. What was to be, would be. In the meantime . . . there was no harm in the fact that Elsa did not want to go to Munich. And standing there on Zelinski's doorstep, he had a swift vision, a remembrance of half-laughing words some one had spoken of Elsa—Elsa in a white dress and wearing a wreath of tiny white flowers in her hair—a maiden decked for the sacrifice, they had said; only now, suddenly, he could not be sure wherein lay the sacrifice.

He left her then, standing alone on the doorstep, a suddenly pathetic little figure.

She had strangely alluring eyes, and her youngness somehow got into a man's blood. . . .

The decision out of his hands, Biran presently found himself resenting the concert he and Zelinski had arranged, over Elsa's head, as it were. He could not see the necessity for it. It was a mere whim on the part of Zelinski, a mere vainglorious whim. He was ready to admit that Elsa's banishment to Munich was necessary, inevitable. Perhaps also it was just as well that

he himself had a commission on his hands that would keep him in New York until the spring. Elsa, studying her music, would not forget him. But why should the girl spend these last few weeks shut up fiddling tunes, when she was giving her whole life to the music. Zelinski was driving her too hard. Biran had not seen her for a week; and then he had come away from seeing her at her lesson with a haunting impression of silent lips and speaking eyes. But, of course, if there was to be a concert, the girl must not fail.

Already the date for the concert was announced. The name of the young violinist had been given to the newspapers, and it appeared, with discreet repetition, that the public appearance of this unknown girl was something of an event. For the rest, Elsa would have to win her laurels on her own merit. She was no parlour performer to be judged by the soft applause of gloved hands. Biran wanted success for her. He wanted her to feel the exacting mind of the public that must judge her, to know its approval, to get the wine of its applause into her veins. He suspected that her indifference was largely of ignorance, ignorance of what the world had to give her. So far she seemed merely accepting the future, rather than claiming it for herself. Over-modesty might verge perilously near to lack of ambition; only Elsa knew she could play, and play well. Yet she was apathetic; but then she was not quite awake; and Biran did not ask more of her than it was in her power to give. His grudge against Zelinski gradually merged into a keen sharing of the master's eagerness. All the world knew that Theodore Biran took a personal interest in the success or failure of the young violinist. And on the whole, Biran was satisfied;

they certainly need not fear a fiasco for Elsa. She would interest her audience as she had roused him, Biran, out of his indifference. He admitted it, a little grimly. But the situation was not so simple as it appeared to the good Herr Zelinski, for instance. The verdict of the world would clothe Elsa in glory, or it would brand her an outcast. And it would have been his hand, Biran's, that gave her the crown of success, or left her stripped before the merciless eyes of the world. He had looked into the other man's eyes and not denied what the world must think of the girl Elsa. But a great artist, vowed to her art,—such a woman could make her own terms with the world.

In the little room at the head of the three flights of stairs, Elsa exacted the utmost from each working hour. Impelled by the single thought, that she must not fail, she spared herself no labour, no fatigue. Her first thought, and her last, until it became a living thing in her heart, was the fear of Biran's eyes upon her, and that she dared not fail. She went every day to Herr Zelinski. The master hovered about her with feverish intensity. He did not believe in a woman's genius, but there were moments when it seemed that this pale, quiet girl was going to prove him wrong. He had no pity for her, no compunction. And when once Biran would have remonstrated, Zelinski turned on him with blazing eyes and wordless scorn. Is it so that a great artist comes into his own, by counting the cost in weariness and fatigue? The worn, erratic little man felt a new zest for life, and he would brook no interference. After years of unprofitable struggle with hopeless mediocrity, he had at last come upon an oasis in the desert. This

girl with her big eyes and wonderful fingers had given him something to look forward to; like rains upon parched grass she had revived his enthusiasm for the art that had become mechanical with him. Something of the hopefulness of his own unfulfilled dreams, the thwarted ambition of his youth, was renewed in anticipation of the great day of her success. His own career had come abruptly and completely to nothing, in the struggle to keep a decent roof over the golden head of the love of his ardent youth. And when in time he heard it from the beloved lips whose yielding to him had been a king's ransom for the dreams he had renounced for their sake, that the beloved bride of the artist and lover was not content to waste herself upon the mere bread-winning husband, it was too late. The songs had gone out of his heart. Years of grinding, objectless toil had all but made him the dry shell of a human being that he appeared to be. His talent was a mocking memory. He used it to earn money for which he had no use, no desire. But then he had no use, no desire, for anything. He had accepted Elsa as a pupil because it so happened that he had an hour on his hands; and in return for his brutal indifference she had almost humanized him. He would have chosen to keep her with him, to devote himself to her, to her talent; tasting the joys of success vicariously, through her success; and instead he had decreed Munich and a greater master than himself; for if Elsa's talent could have waited another year which he would have treasured for himself, a still small voice warned him that the Fräulein, having unfortunately the heart of a woman, as well as the genius to make beautiful music, should at once and with her whole heart, be about the business of becoming an artist.

There were other women, beautiful and charming, who had not the girl's genius, and who could console his friend Biran. So he had decreed for Munich. But he meant that this first success of Elsa's should in some part be his as well. And Elsa neither shirked nor complained. Day after day she came to her task. . . . But there were moments when, staring into the empty silence of her ugly room, she came very near to hating the violin that kept her slaving, hour after hour, day after day, . . . always alone. She did not want to be a great musician if she was always to be alone, with nobody to care if she were happy or miserable. She wanted to be happy and beautiful, like Miss Noreen, whom she had seen on the street with Biran one day when she was returning to her room after a nerve-racking afternoon with Zelinski.

But the day of the concert drew on, with relentless surety; yet the days seemed to drag endlessly.

Then, at last, it was the morning of the day itself.

It had been arranged that Zelinski should fetch Elsa to the concert hall. And while he waited for her in the ugly crowded parlour, he did strange things to his hair. He had come in a carriage, perhaps fearing to trust Elsa to the dangers of a motor-car; and as perforce their progress was slow, his nervousness increased until now it was his neat cravat that fell a prey to his restless hands. Elsa smiled at him reassuringly. They did not speak during the long drive. Only once, as if suddenly remembering, Zelinski spoke rapidly of a difficult passage in the opening number; and to Elsa's reply that she had it perfectly, he said shortly, "Zat is good."

One hand cupping the delicate petals of the single

rose she wore fastened into the tulle of her bodice, Elsa smiled wanly, because she was a little tired, and because she was not thinking at all of the music. The rose was one of those Biran had brought her that afternoon. But her glance was troubled, remembering the annoyance in her friend's eyes when she told him of the wonderful, flaming lilies that had come from Mr. VanSmythe, and a note; she had just opened the box when Biran's name was brought up to her, and she had left the lilies untouched and gone down at once, taking the note with her. No one except Biran had ever asked her to supper before; and she did not quite know what to say; the messenger who had brought the lilies was still waiting at the door. Almost sharply, Biran wanted to know how the young man had known where to send flowers and a note to Elsa. He reread the note, couched in terms of an easy familiarity that was an open defiance; but the boy had been hard hit, and he was new in the world to which he thought Elsa belonged; and Elsa, not understanding, was merely uncertain how to answer. She took it for granted Biran also was asked to supper. And without explaining the young man's impertinence, Biran could not very well ask her to throw his flowers out of the window. So he merely said, with an annoyance Elsa felt without appreciating, that as she was already engaged for supper with him, she could not accept Mr. VanSmythe's invitation. The note dispatched, he gave the roses he had brought with him, into her hands; staying only a moment longer; and again in her room, Elsa was no longer conscious of her solitude; the dreariness fled from her eyes and heart. She hung over the roses, caressing each separate blossom of the large armful, and the afternoon was gone before she

had chosen the single half-blown flower she would wear that evening. She had not been afraid before, but the thought was always with her, that she must not fail; at the last moment she had taken up her violin, and the music had no difficulty for her: she played as naturally as a bird sings its song; but she knew she must not fail. And if she could not say it to Herr Zelinski, still she knew that the rose was her talisman against fear and failure. To wear Biran's rose at her breast was as if her friend trusted her not to fail him, as well.

Elsa returned to reality when the carriage stopped. The violin case held carefully under his arm, Zelinski offered his hand to her. Obediently, gathering her cloak about her, she left the carriage. A brief interval, and she passed through a door some one held open before her; across a little space of darkness she felt rather than saw that people, many persons, were gathered together, looking up at her.

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In a little room separated from the stage by a heavy curtain, Zelinski was at last calm, with the calm of suspended animation, like turbulent waters caught and held in their onward rush, in a glacial grip, that had piled wave upon wave and congealed them. The matter was out of his hands. And he had opened the door from the little retiring-room to the stage and watched Elsa pass him and take her place before the sea of faces, with a sense of destiny that rendered him entirely passive. Then he dropped the curtain, retired to the farthest corner of the room. He kept vigil alone, for he had allowed Biran only a moment with Elsa before sending him to join all the stranger-people in front.

And now she too was out there, alone with her violin.

The little smile was still in Elsa's eyes as she came slowly forward, to bow her acknowledgment.

She held the violin in a light embrace against her breast, and as she stood there the applause seemed to break over her small head, to envelop her slender, swaying figure. Gradually, her glance individualized the faces swimming up to her from the gloom at her feet; she met young VanSmythe's gaze for a fleeting second; but her glance passed on, scarcely recognizing; some one called her name, and a flower fell at her feet; she stooped and picked it up. She would have gone from them then, but the demand was insistent, and she raised the violin to her shoulder again.

Lost in the obscurity of the gloom her eyes had failed to penetrate, Biran heard the first notes of a little peasant song he had taught Elsa when he first knew her, a little song he had often sung while he worked; a simple melody, not a concert piece at all; but as she played it now it sang itself straight into a man's heart. It was a long time before these people, whose hearts she had touched with the simple little song of love, would part with the young violinist. Then, presently, she was playing again; the concert was all but over. And Biran, no longer listening, or even aware of the music, knew at last that all this mockery of strange persons and lights and music was as futile as had been the doubts and hesitations he had opposed to the single fact that he wanted Elsa for himself. He gave no name to his feeling; vowed no vows to himself, as he would vow

none to Elsa. But the thought grew in his heart of the moment when she would yield herself to his arms, in virginal passion, while love came to her soul and body. . . .

It would soon be over now,—the fiddling.

What madness had possessed him to think of relinquishing her to the gaping crowds? He who could know the lingering glance of her eyes, the yielding of her hands into his. What did he care for her talent of music—when he might kiss her lips? And yet he had thought to barter her girlhood and youth, all the precious possibilities of her womanhood, for the tinsel and false glitter of the mob's applause! Even if the world gave her fame in return, life would be more generous to her. A moment of glory was not recompense enough for her youth. There were far more precious things in life than the ability to make music. Standing there beyond his reach where his eyes could not command hers, every insinuating line of Elsa's slender body, the grace of her upraised arms, promised she would know how to love. She was playing brilliantly, exquisitely. But what could these indifferently curious people know of the soft compulsion of her arms around a man's neck, her soft yielding into his arms until she nestled there like his very self; as he would know it, alone with her, the man who loved her and whom she loved. . . .

They had to accept it at last that Elsa would not play again. Then swift upon the music descended confusion and preoccupation, as the audience went its various ways. The concert hall was soon empty. And in the retiring-room Zelinski had just kissed Elsa's hands, and with tears of emotion in his eyes hovered irreso-

lutely about her, for Biran, with Elsa's wraps on his arm, had unmistakably dismissed him, while she stood between them, all will and volition in suspense within her. Had Zelinski offered his arm she must have placed her hand within it. She was dimly conscious of his disappointment, without connecting it with herself. She stood quietly, intensely, waiting. Then Biran put her cloak about her, and nodding a brief good-night to Zelinski, held the door open for her to pass out before him.

Alone together in the motor, he did not even look at her. He knew Elsa had heard the address he had given the driver. It was not a long drive to the studio, and they did not speak. And still in silence, Biran opened the door with his key, and Elsa felt the heavy velvet curtains fall slowly into place behind her. Just inside the doorway, she paused, mechanically unfastened her cloak, as if to free herself from the oppression of its weight; and slowly the wrap slipped from her shoulders, slowly downward, the length of her tall figure, and lay in a heap on the floor at her feet. There was something symbolical in the slow revealing fall of the cloak about her, in the slow emergence of the slender white-clad figure of the girl before the man's eyes. . . . Her natural slenderness, intensified by the long straight lines of her dress, made her appear almost fleshless. In that moment of intense physical sensation an air of mystery still enfolded her. She came to the sacrifice as truly virginal as if passion had no existence in the world. But even as she met Biran's look upon her her eyes grew darker, veiled under their lashes. Tense, motionless, her quietness was that of smothered flame ready to burst into vivid, vital life. The slow rise and fall of the white

rose fastened into the tulle at her breast alone showed that she breathed. For a long moment their bared glances mingled; they were alone in the world and the mystery of life was about to be revealed to them—mystery that is revealed anew in the body and soul of every man and woman; the mystery of passionate love, as old as the ages, eternally new. In that moment, they might have been remote and alone in a deserted world, naked and unashamed, as innocent and knowing as the birds of the free air. Then, like slow fires warming into flame, the girl's eyes kindled into life. Slowly their glance wavered, fell from the man's look upon her; but in the instant there had flashed into them the acknowledgment of her womanhood, in challenge and yielding. She felt Biran move quickly to her; and her eyes closed; but she did not shrink from him. She stood motionless, withdrawn into herself . . . waiting.

. . . She was so sweet, so wistful.

It came over Biran in almost a flash of pity for her. Then he stooped to her, and lifted her in his arms.

The heap of silk cushions received her from his arms as into another embrace. It was then—Biran kissed her. And where a thorn of the rose had struck deep into her flesh a drop of crimson welled in a little stain. Her eyes widened with the sharp exquisite pain; but she only smiled into her lover's eyes when she felt the thorn pressing deeper; and she raised her slender bare arms and laid them closely about his neck.

PART II



CHAPTER XIV

THERE was a premonition of spring in the air. The long winter months of their isolation in a remote village, far from the world of people and event, passed, before Biran or Elsa were aware of the actual passing. So far as the world was concerned, it did not exist for them. Any necessary communication with the old life of friends and affairs was held by Biran through his servant left in charge of the studio. For the rest, he and Elsa were as completely alone as if there were no past or future in the world. The cottage that housed them in their solitude, the long walks, often through rain and buffeting winds; the occasional radiant days; the long quiet evenings before the open fire while the storm raged without . . . completed the circle of their life. The hours were all too short for the joyous adventure of their days together. Elsa was like a creature vivified with sensation, vital with responsiveness. Life itself possessed her. And she asked nothing of life but to live each moment, every hour, to its utmost of joy and contentment. Waking in the morning, her eyes were radiant, mysterious, with the wonder of the night; while her last little child-like sigh at night, before drifting into sleep, was of the wonder of the day just passed, the marvel of the day to come. She was young as it is given to few on earth to be young, with the youth and freshness of the eternal morning. And she was always beau-

tiful now. As for Biran, he was too completely content with his days to spare a thought or a desire away from Elsa. Why think of tomorrow when today was so wonderfully his?

Every morning, after breakfast, Biran waited for Elsa at the foot of the stairs, and if the day were wet or stormy, busied himself with their raincoats, while upstairs Elsa flew about, with a great patter of heels and merry chatter, making ready for their walk. And always, waiting for her at the foot of the stairs, Biran smiled to himself. "Elsa—!" Then she would appear at the head of the steps, a close cap framing her radiant face until it seemed there was only the tip of a nose, and laughing eyes . . . a heedless, eager child whom Biran would catch into his arms to stop her headlong descent of the stairs; and would have to hold close while he disentangled the tassel of her cap that invariably got into difficulties with the buttons of his coat; then the buoyant mass of her hair had again to be confined within the close bounds of the cap; and while she steadied herself against his shoulder, Biran drew on her overshoes. When at last she was ready and equipped, it was her little strategy to let Biran struggle for a moment with his coat collar. "Of all unruly contraptions—" She had to stand on tip-toe to reach the offending collar. . . .

Rain or snow or wind, they never missed the long walk. If it stormed, Elsa loved nothing so much as the driving wind. If the sun shone, there was nothing she loved so much as the sunshine. Time and again she would dart ahead, giving herself to the wind; until Biran strode down upon her, and with a look, or a touch of his hand on hers, subdued her to his side. And as

often he would deliberately put off the moment when he would overtake her.

It was a game they played; and Elsa knew to a nicety when the moment of surrender found her. Only once, when they had first come to the cottage in the wilderness, and Biran would have caught up with her, she eluded him. Her laughing challenge came to him over her shoulder. It was snowing heavily; a gale was blowing; and the tempestuousness of the elements entered into her spirits. She darted ahead, still tempting Biran with her laughing mouth, her eyes. He followed, meaning to catch and punish her as she deserved; but his step had lagged behind his look upon her . . . Would it be the laughing child, or the mysterious-eyed woman he would catch into his arms—the child who would cling in his embrace, or the woman who compelled him to woo her? But child or woman, she was wholly alluring. A moment; and he was almost upon her. Her little laugh, a beckoning wave of her hand, the eluding grace of her slight figure as she quickened her pace, tantalized him. Instantly she divined his intention to catch her, and still fleeing from him she gave herself to a sudden gust of wind, felt herself borne along as if on wings, through dizzying spaces. Her feet scarcely touched the ground. The sound of the passing wind was in her ears, and she could no longer hear her lover's pursuing step behind her; breathless and frightened, she tried to stop, tried to call to Biran, only to find herself carried along by the wind, unable to stop, to turn back, to cry out. The whole world seemed to be whirling about her in great white masses, snatching her breath away. She closed her eyes to shut out the blackness closing in about her; felt herself sinking, sinking, into bottomless depths of

stifling white softness. . . . Then strong arms caught her away from the biting wind, raised her out of the dreadful, soft, white depths. Biran carried her back to the cottage in his arms, a small, frightened, sobbing child. And that night, none the worse for her fright and her plunge into the snow-bank, but with the memory of her terror lingering in her eyes, Elsa was very lovely, and unwontedly serious, as they spoke of the morning's adventure. Her hand held closely in his, Biran laughed at her. But Elsa would not quite smile. "It was too horrible, Theo. I put out my hand and you weren't there. Then I called, and you didn't answer. I thought you weren't there, that I was alone—that you weren't there—even if I should call—that you wouldn't come—"

But she had not called him in vain, he had come. And now again he soothed her in his arms, calling her a silly child; then he drew her to him and kissed her lips; and lying close in his arms Elsa whispered she would never again run away from him. And thereafter she walked sedately at his side, her hand tucked safely into his.

In a way, they were quite child-like in their happiness, joyous, care-free, romping hand in hand, Biran renewing his youth in Elsa's contagious youngness. Yet in the heart of each was that which merely slumbered, instinct and powerful with every drop of blood pulsing in the body; and in the midst of play, any moment, many times a day, a word, a sudden glimpse into the eyes of the other, a fleeting touch of hand upon hand, and swift passion would engulf them, plunging them to the very depth of emotion. For even in their play Biran was always the lover of Elsa, while more and more her charm

intrigued him. Moreover, had they not chosen to live life as body and soul and heart taught them to live it?

Subtly, the passing days put their mark on Elsa. It was not only that she was always beautiful now. It was not only that the sheer joy of pulsing life, of vital emotion, was visible in her face, in the very poise of her body, where before had been only languor and passivity. One moment the impulsive, heedless child, the next she was a woman with all a woman's reticences and a woman's rare gift of giving. It was not alone the little airs of matronly importance and dignity she assumed. It was in her brave, glad eyes, in the thousand and one little services her hands found to do for her beloved; perhaps most of all in her fearlessness of love, with the man to whom she had given herself, without reserve or fear or doubt, counting nothing too precious to give; less yielding than freely generous. The night of love that had tried body and soul in the white flame of passion had left no mark of fear or shame upon her. There was perfect naturalness in her love for Biran. And Biran's passion too, had chastened. Gradually he learned to be gentle with Elsa, as he had not been gentle in the first days of his love for her. Had she resisted him he must have subdued her resistance. But her docility, her very submissiveness, tempered his ardour with a feeling of protectiveness. She was so sure in her faith. For the rest, the little household conducted itself with all the sedate routine of the thousand and one other households in the land. Every morning Biran and Elsa faced each other in accustomed fashion across the breakfast table, and while Elsa poured the coffee, Biran ensconced himself behind the morning paper. They addressed each other

as "My dear," with unsmiling gravity; quite as if from long established habit. But sooner or later, usually with her second piece of toast, the laughter would bubble to Elsa's lips, and by that time Biran also would have lowered his paper until their eyes met over its edge. Then Elsa would inquire, "And what is the news this morning, my dear?" to which Biran, ostentatiously delaying the answer for the absent-minded moment of the preoccupied peruser of news, would respond, "Ah—nothing of importance, my love. Two foreign wars threatened, an aviator drops to his death, and if you will insist on looking like the rosy dawn, you cannot expect a mere man to read the paper like a responsible citizen." Thereupon the real conversation of the day would begin.

The morning when Biran looked up suddenly to surprise a pucker on Elsa's brow and a pencil to her lips, was epoch-making in confirming them in their state of domesticity. On his anxious inquiry, she confessed her difficulty; and greatly amused and secretly moved to greater tenderness, Biran gave counsel in this matter of supply and demand in household management. He smiled to himself more than once during the day. And if his credo of the past rose up to confront him, he was not intimidated. Apparently it did not irk him to kiss Elsa every morning, nor to pass the toast, or even to share with her the details of household problems. In this new and vastly becoming rôle of concernment in practical affairs, thoughtful over the daily ordering of their material life, Elsa was wholly adorable, with a piquant charm that was a never-failing joy to her lover. But in all things concerning Biran Elsa had an unerring instinct. Moreover, she had not forgotten

certain of his caustic utterances on the subject of matrimony; and she seemed always to know just when to put aside preoccupation, and come to sit on the arm of his chair.

So the days passed, and at last spring was in the air.

Then one day, contrary to her wont, Elsa did not race Biran in making ready for their walk. She lingered in the upper hall, and answering his call showed herself without coat or hat. Hanging over the balustrade she looked like a teasing child, her rosy-red mouth like a cherry held beyond his reach, tantalizing him, yet prepared to capitulate on the instant. Interpreting her reluctant hesitation by the light of past occurrences, Biran laughed. "What's the matter? Can't you find your hat? It's a soul-inspiring day."

"Theo, if you don't mind, I won't go walking this morning."

Biran had just thrust one arm into an overcoat sleeve. Not go walking—? "What's the matter?" It very inadequately expressed the degree of his surprise. He stood looking up at Elsa, until his glance confused her.

"Nothing's the matter, Big Bear dear."

Leaning above him, her eyes intrigued him. Biran took a step nearer the stairs. Then Elsa's voice halted him, "It's a surprise, Theo." But his instant thought had winged up to her. He stood waiting for her to say more . . . then Elsa said quickly, "I promised to help Marthe change things about in the music room this morning. So you see, I can't go walking too," but the slow colour had come into her face as it had been wont

to do in the days when she first knew Biran, long before she had known that she loved him. "It was to have been a surprise for you—" But she had read the swift thought in Biran's mind, and for an instant they had shared it, glance for glance. She still leaned to him, sentient to the very tips of her fingers; and now it was she who waited for a word from him. But the sudden emotion that had swept from the man's heart to his thoughts became fixed in a half-smile on his lips. He finished putting on his overcoat, looked in his pockets for his cigarette case.

"Theo—"

He had just found the cigarette case. "Yes?"

"You—you aren't going off—like that?"

"I am going to walk."

Elsa was at the head of the stairs now. "Theo, do you want me to come?"

He was buttoning his overcoat. "If you have other plans—"

"You said yourself the other day that the piano was in a bad light." Her eyes pleaded with him to smile with her; she was waiting for him to come to her, to exact toll from her for trifling with him; while Biran continued fumbling in his pockets for his gloves. Then she came down one step.

The handle of the door already turned in his hand, Biran called back to her, "Better have the gardener in if you want anything moved." Then the door opened sharply, and he went out. He almost strolled; after a moment he wished he had his walking stick; but he had fallen out of the habit of carrying it when he walked with Elsa; she had a way of circling her hands around his arm that made a walking stick something of a nui-

sance. He smiled involuntarily; however, he made a mental note to look up the walking stick again; then he lighted a cigarette. It *was* a soul-inspiring day. Promise and fruition were in the air, and a subtle feeling of restlessness that yet suggested peace and content. Almost in a night the delicate green had shown itself along the roadway; in the warming breath of the wind the trees were ready to burst into fertile life; and a bird was calling its single insistent note.

Biran took off his hat, raised his face to the wind.

Why had Elsa chosen the first day of spring to move the piano? Why had he imagined that Elsa would give him a child—?

He *had* complained of the bad light on the piano. Elsa was in no wise at fault that at the moment when he stood looking up at her there had quickened in his heart a memory of Elsa with a little child in her arms. . . . She had not known he was watching her, that day she stood at the gate holding in her arms a neighbour's child. Her head had drooped over the little face to feel its cheek against her own; and now again the vivid picture had flashed before his eyes.

Suddenly, the sun-warmed, softly-brilliant day seemed to mock him. He missed the pressure of Elsa's hand on his arm. He had caught a last glimpse of her face as he closed the door between them. He need not have come alone, leaving Elsa at the head of the stairs. Involuntarily his steps lagged. Then, resolutely, he continued on his way. What could he say to Elsa—?

For . . . if it so happened that the love quickening in his heart should come to life in a child, his child and Elsa's, what then of the great artist he had destined

Elsa to be? Elsa who now was only a young girl who had given herself to the man she loved.

Emotion by emotion, rather than by outward event, Biran went back over the months since they had come to the cottage together. He had not again asked himself if he loved Elsa. She was not like other women, not like any other woman he had ever known. He knew only that she gave him something he had never even dreamed a woman had to give a man. He had felt it vaguely, from the very first. She moved him to thoughts, to emotions, no woman had ever inspired in him. She had given him everything, and yet he felt that she had not despoiled herself. She charmed and fascinated him; yet he felt she had more than charm and fascination for him. Could it have been forever and a day with them . . . yet he must always have known that theirs was only the day . . . if he meant to keep his compact. And the day would come when he must keep the very letter of his compact. For he had no right to Elsa's love, beyond his power to render it back to her in greater and more fruitful measure.

If he had not given a thought to her music in the months they had been at the cottage, still, every moment, every hour, they had spent together had gone to redeeming his promise that the girl should know all that love had to teach her, whereby she would learn the lesson of life. And Elsa had every reason to expect a brilliant future, great success, other loves.

He rose to his feet abruptly, and struck off sharply in a direction away from the cottage.

After all, was the alternative so inexorable? If there was a child, there would be no question of the future.

As the mother of his child Elsa's future would be assured.

In a revulsion of feeling, the pendulum of his tense emotion swung backward, and he deliberately confronted the problem of the future in terms of crude directness.—In that case, had Elsa given him a child, after the cottage in the wilderness life would have had to go on with them as it did with the rest of the world,—the Eltons, for instance,—he was forced to smile, not without a certain amusement. It was a novel sensation to contemplate himself as a man with household gods; and as the mother of their child, his wife, Elsa would have fulfilled her destiny. He knew there was no room in her heart for more than love.

But on such terms he had no right to ask Elsa for a child. For he would never make her the mother of his child, that she might thereby be the greater artist. And yet—their love had not been barren. As for the vision in his heart of Elsa with her lips pressed to a child's cheek,—who better than he, Biran, knew the brief passing of visions? And the reality of Elsa herself was still his.

It was late afternoon when Biran returned to the cottage. A glance into the music room showed him the furniture had not been moved; the piano was still in its old place in the cross-light of two windows; Elsa was nowhere visible. But it was nearing the dinner hour, and on his way upstairs he overtook the maid Marthe going up to attend her mistress. So he passed on to his dressing-room. Presently he heard the maid return downstairs, knew Elsa was alone. But he did not go to her. And the door between the rooms remained closed.

When he had changed, he went down, and waited for Elsa in the little drawing-room. And during dinner they conversed about the weather, and made alternate remarks on the subject of spring flowers, a bowl of which adorned the table; and later, Elsa decreed that they would have coffee in the music room, as they sometimes did when she chose to prolong the formality of dinner. Biran, nothing loath at this little sign of perturbation in Elsa, silently bided his time. Whatever had been, they would have the long evening together. She would have to make generous amends for the dreariness of his solitary walk; for, after all, it had been her caprice, to move the furniture on this day of all days.

But in his turn, he let her see that he enjoyed his favourite dessert; and presently, standing formally by the door, while Elsa, with equal reserve and dignity, passed him with a slight inclination of her head, his thought was that she had learned to do it very well. . . .

As she passed him tonight she did not look at him, and she appeared to Biran to have grown taller. Subtly, she seemed to repeat the note of sophistication that the lights and added colour gave the room. As she entered it, it appeared to enfold her. Only the slightest quiver of her eyelashes betrayed her; none the less it did not escape Biran. Just as he had deliberately remained away from the cottage all day, he now let Elsa pass him, when he might have caught her into his arms. She did not turn when he came up swiftly behind her. She had not looked back, but every drop of blood in her veins responded to his nearness as his breath warmed her neck. He felt the slight quiver of her body, and his heart-beats quickened. She must have felt them,

throb for throb. Still she did not move. Then his breath was on her cheek . . . and the long day was over.

They watched the fire in the grate burn slowly to a glowing heap of ashes; then Biran tossed on a single stick of wood; and in the sudden leap of flames Elsa's face showed for an instant, vividly white against the darkness of the room. Biran crushed her hand to his lips. "You woman of wine and cool waters! What is your allure for a man?" . . . For if in the morning-time of the day, the sun and the wind in her heart and on her face made her a creature of the elements, sent the warm blood coursing through her young veins . . . to-night, now, with the intermittent blaze of the flames leaping over her, half-revealing her face only to obscure her eyes from him, even while she lay supine in his embrace, something in Elsa seemed to elude her lover. His passionate, restrained demand found no answer save in the cool rose of her lips glowing into scarlet under his kisses. Once, there had been a mad moment . . . but he dared not think of that now. She was so small, so slender, in his arms, so wholly his to do with her as he would. Suddenly, a great tenderness swept into his heart. Gently now, he kissed the closing eyelids, her neck, until her eyes opened to him again; but he merely looked down at her, unsmiling, gravely. . . . What more, in heaven's name, could he want of love? What more ask of the beloved woman? . . .

The fire had quite died down. Only a dim glow remained among the embers; soon they would no longer give forth even a faint warmth. Biran had wrapped a silken cover about Elsa; and when the last lingering glow died into greyness and ashes, he would carry her

upstairs as gently as though she were a sleeping child. She was so tender, so helpless, so trusting, in his arms. She did not sleep, and when she felt him bend above her, her smile winged up to meet his look upon her. . . . Where then should she rest in safety, if not in his arms?

CHAPTER XV

ORDINARILY, such little post as came to the cottage was left at the door near the luncheon hour. The few letters, whose contents Biran acquainted himself with at a glance, were without exception of business purport, all his private letters remaining at the studio, unopened and unanswered. Therefore, the day he received the letter that was neither from his lawyer nor from his man of business, before opening it he mused to himself that Wilkes must have had an uncomfortable quarter of an hour between the "urgent" written in the corner of the important-appearing envelope, and his master's orders. It happened to be the only letter that day, and Biran owned to a certain curiosity. But he laid it aside until after luncheon; then he opened and read it, and without comment put it in his coat pocket. It was one of Elsa's comfortable little peculiarities, that she never asked questions. And the disappearance of the letter into Biran's pocket apparently ended the incident of its arrival.

They had already been for a long walk that morning, so when in the course of the afternoon Biran said to Elsa that he was going out to walk, it appeared he did not expect her to come with him. Alone, he followed the path into the woods beyond the cottage; and presently, sitting on a felled tree, he re-read the letter. In a way, it was a bolt out of a clear sky. Disconcerting as well, because it thrust upon him the immediate

need of decision; doubly disconcerting because he was aware of a certain elation at the thought of all that the letter brought back to his mind. For it recalled him to town, to his work; and while he resented the disturbing necessity for decision thus put upon him by the blunder of his man in readdressing the letter, he none the less admitted that sooner or later the necessity would have found him out. To come to the decision, pregnant as it was with far more vital issues than the possible repudiation of a contract, was another matter. And as he sat there he drew on the back of the envelope that contained the disturbing letter, fragments and details of the figures as he had already blocked them out, for the sculptured group of which the letter spoke. He had accepted the commission in a barren hour, nor did the letter revive his interest in it. He felt no inspiration at the thought of the heroic figure of "Justice," brandishing aloft a sword over the heads of men. Even if he returned to New York, it would be to decline to carry out the commission. So much at least, was definite in his mind. But still he sat on, drawing vague figures on the envelope, no longer of the repudiated "Justice," nor with any certain vision before his eyes, yet with a greater and greater concentration. But what he sought eluded him. Something had passed before his spirit like a flash of light before closed eyes, and was gone. But he had not come to the woods to seek inspiration. He had not even come to seek the answer he must send back to the Board of Judges. Well enough he knew there was nothing in his heart or mind he could bring to the work they required of him. None the less, decision had to be faced. And after a time, while he seemed not to be thinking at all, the question resolved itself into the

simplest terms,—that in any case it could not always be today with him and Elsa. The letter had merely written it upon the wall; he must of course always have known this very thing would have to be faced; but with Elsa's cheek against his, Elsa's eyes looking at him with their tender, daring smile, it was not in nature that he should think of the future without her, or should think of the future at all. Still, the letter was there, in his hand, not to be ignored. The letter itself he would dismiss with a single brief line. . . . But by late afternoon the only other decision he had reached was that there was no need for immediate decision. He had not told Elsa about the letter. And if it could not always be today with them, it could be so for yet a little longer. And all the time he was thinking that he had not touched hand to clay for four months and more, was aware of a sudden disquiet, a nostalgia for the cool, bare spaces of his work room, the feel of the damp clay. . . .

His pencil never ceased making figures upon the envelope. He sat so still that a tiny creature of the woods looked down upon him from a near-by tree, and presently ventured to scamper down to earth at his feet. But Biran did not even glance in the direction of the discreet little rustle. So another hour passed, and he knew Elsa would be waiting for him; but he could not return to her just then. He was brutally frank with himself. For in his heart of hearts he knew that for the first time since he had loved her he had wronged Elsa in his thoughts. The first time that he kissed her with a thought that there would be no tomorrow for them, he would betray her love. He had never before thought of Elsa as a man thinks of a woman whom he kisses today and leaves tomorrow. With a whole-hearted abandon

to the moment, they had not given a thought to what was to be . . . after the cottage in the wilderness. But now he had said it to himself, that it could not always be today with them; that, for the rest, Elsa had her future, and he his work.

The pencil was still, at last. He remained for a long time looking down at the figures that had shaped under his hand; for among the details of the heroic group he had drawn again and again some memory of Elsa,—here a suggestion of her profile, there the slender outlines of her figure; while looking up at him from the blurring lines the sweet young face of Elsa became animate, with cheek rounding against a little child's, as he had once seen her, never to forget. Slowly then, he tore the envelope into tiny bits, let the pieces slowly escape to the ground from between his fingers. Was that the answer he was seeking? He had come into the woods with the thought that he and Elsa had been playing at life; and that their play-time was almost over. He had meant to have a reckoning with himself, and their future. And his unconscious pencil had suddenly revealed to him a future and a tomorrow. . . . Involuntarily, inevitably, the thought had again appeared, the vision graven on his heart, of Elsa, with a little child at her breast.

The late afternoon shadows fell across the path. Already it was darkening in the woods. Another day gone. Biran looked about him, ascertaining his whereabouts. Several weeks had passed since the day he had gone without Elsa, to walk. The red-budding trees had now put on their mantles of a myriad tiny green leaves; there were even a few over-eager flowers here and there amid the green of the grass. In the garden at the cot-

tage a lilac bush would soon be in bloom.—Would Elsa be at the gate waiting for him?

Biran was out of the woods now, walking rapidly, his thoughts going before him to the cottage.

It was still the spring of the year. . . .

Another five minutes, and he was in sight of the cottage, and there was Elsa waiting at the gate. She was not yet aware of his approach. She stood quite still, and Biran too, stopped, watching her. Something in her pose, in the arms lightly folded across her breast, in the droop of her head . . . instantly his mind completed the picture. He said it with bated breath, "Jove! it's a masterpiece." Then he came to her slowly, seeing her with quickening vision; the small, admirably poised head, the vivid close bands of her hair encircling it as in sculptured lines; the column of her throat, bare and firm; her slender, strong arms . . . as they would gather a child into their embrace; he saw her eyes, the heartfelt look in them; while the soft whiteness of her dress clothed her as in the very garment of her youth and loveliness.—The marble itself would scarcely have seemed more perfect than Elsa in her quiet stillness.

Then she heard his step.

Joy and youth were in her eyes as she waited for him. And as Biran caught her into his arms, joy and youth were in the lips she held up to him,—warm, ardent lips in whose living kiss there was nothing to remind him of the cold, hard touch of marble. . . .

One day, quite unexpectedly to himself, Biran told Elsa about the letter. He spoke of it casually, as of a matter of no importance. He said, "The Board of

Judges writes to inquire about the progress of the work of art I engaged to produce for their Municipal Building." He had not yet written his answer, declining to fulfil the commission. And Elsa, from her nest among the cushions, only smiled. "That was too bad of me, wasn't it—to run off with their artist?"

Biran was playing with one of the silver tassels that hung from a cord around her waist. "I have several studies made for it. The design was approved. And the marble ordered six months ago." For this was the heroic group that was to have detained him in New York until the spring, when it was decided that Elsa should go to Munich. "The group was to have been finished this spring—as the Committee takes the liberty of reminding me." He reached for the other silver tassel. Again Elsa said, with the same little daring smile, "Of course you are sorry to disappoint them. But circumstances over which you have no control—" and she was really thinking not at all of the Board of Judges nor of the heroic group, but of the way her lover's hair grew back from his forehead, of the little touch of grey at the temples that she loved with a peculiar feeling of exultation,—just that tiny bit of grey in his hair. . . . She leaned to him as he sat with elbows braced on his knees and put her cheek against his. "You do not really mind the circumstances, do you, Big Bear dear?"

The twilights were lengthening. There was no longer a need of lights in the hour before dinner. It was the hour of camaraderie for Elsie and Biran, when they accepted each other's presence sedately, an interlude in their day, a hush, a lull, between the high spirits of romping youth and the subtler exactions of their eve-

nings together. Very often Biran would go to the piano that had long since been moved out of the annoying cross-light; and while he played he could see Elsa, not so intent on the bit of stitching she held in her hands that she did not instantly know when he waited the response of her glance. And perhaps more often than not her glance was on her lover's face rather than on the little square of linen that had become a symbol of domesticity to them. It was one of their jokes, one of the trifling, absurd details that knit their life together, this bit of exceeding femininity on the part of Elsa. She had produced the ridiculous bit of linen one day with an air of sedateness; and there they sat, Biran at one side of the fireplace smoking the cigarette of contentment, Elsa at the other side, stitching on her bit of linen.

A week had passed since Biran had dispatched his answer to the Board of Judges. And the days completed themselves with a cameo-like clearness and purity; nothing disturbed the life of the cottage. Only the twilights lengthened . . . and beyond Elsa's head where she sat near the window, the lilac bush at the gate coloured into bloom. From his place across the hearth, Biran watched Elsa through the slight haze of his cigarette smoke, until presently he forgot to smoke, and the cigarette burned slowly in his hand. Deep in contemplation of the lovely eyes and lips, for the first time since he had loved her he felt no desire, no impulse, to go to her. He looked at her eyes and lips; and saw their living warmth transfigured into the pure, impersonal loveliness of marble; beneath the soft fabric of her dress his eyes divined the firm, low line of her bosom, the long, slender lines of her body; and he saw it in the cold purity of marble, exquisite, delicately veined; felt

it shaping under his hands, cool, firm . . . as marble is cool and firm. Slowly, his eyes followed the curve of her shoulder, followed the length of her arm, with a look that would make every line its own; until he felt that the beat of his quickening pulse must be heard in the quiet room. And divining his look upon her, Elsa put away her work, stood straight and tall before him, for the moment his glance engulfed her; then with a swift impetuous movement she came to him; and Biran held her close, while his hand rounded the curve of her shoulder, followed the slender length of her arm, even as his glance had followed it; and the arm was cool and smooth under his touch, as the marble would be cool and smooth; then he came to reality in a flash of comprehensive feeling; for the arm he caressed was soft and blood-warmed; and there was life in the slow, even rise and fall of her breast against his encircling arm, in the faint, warm breath from her lips on his face. Almost roughly he released her, almost put her from him, and without a word went to the piano, turned his back on her, leaving Elsa to return to her low chair by the window. She took up her bit of work again, accustomed to her lover's impetuousness, as lenient to it as a mother would be to an indulged child. And when presently Biran's hands on the keys quieted into melody, Elsa, keeping her eyes on her work, thought the passionate impulse had passed. For the cottage harboured its storms as well as its gracious calms; and if Elsa had smiled when the rose-thorn struck into her flesh, there were other moments when passion was not at high-tide with her. She folded away her work, and when Biran wheeled suddenly on the piano stool, he saw her sitting with folded hands—empty hands—the swift thought swept into his mind.

"Elsa, where is your violin?"

The peremptory question startled her. "Oh—I told Marthe to put it away."

Biran rose. His first impulse had been to go out into the open. He had had no thought of her violin when he turned to Elsa from the piano. It was the sight of her empty hands, the urge of his own heart for action, accomplishment, that made him remember her violin now as a solution, it might even be, a way of release. . . . For in the instant before he swung about on the piano stool the walls of the room had seemed closing in around him. The woman in Elsa smothered him; something in him was striving for outlet, to be free. He spoke brusquely, trying for a lighter tone. "You'll forget your notes if you don't look out. Where's the violin? I'll get it. It's your turn to play to me." He stood waiting. "Where is it?"

"I'll get it." But Elsa did not rise at once. She spoke of the violin reluctantly, as if the mention of it were like the intrusion of a third person into their intimacy. Then she rose and went out of the room. She did not want Biran to know that she had told the maid to put the violin away in the dark little closet under the stairs. She wanted it out of the way where she would not always be coming upon it. . . .

She came back in a moment, and Biran took the case out of her hands, went to the piano, tuned the violin, returned it to her. She took it from him as though she did not know what to do with it. He laughed. "You funny child. One might think you did not know your lesson."

Elsa stood before him, her glance divided between him and the violin. Then she raised the instrument to

her shoulders. "I—I don't care about playing, Theo." Her fingers woke an echo on the strings, then muted it. She stood in a slightly negligent pose that revealed all the pliant grace of her body, the pose of the graceful head, while her upward glance sought Biran's, a little daring, a little pleading; and Biran, his eyes missing nothing of her maidenliness, with its potentialities of womanhood, was holding himself tensely, in breathless expectation. Once before he had sensed it hovering just beyond his grasp like a troubling, elusive thought—some new wonder and glory of her mysterious womanhood. But he had glimpsed it only to lose it, and forgotten it in the kiss of her warm, ardent lips; had right royally bartered the fleeting vision for the reality of Elsa's love. And now again, with the flutter of an eyelash, it eluded him, hovered past him into nothingness. It was as though he had come a long and weary way only to miss the treasure.

He turned from Elsa then, went back to the piano, seemed waiting for her to begin playing. But she did not play. The violin lowered from her shoulder, she sat down on the arm of the chair Biran had quitted so abruptly, and faced him across the little distance. "I don't care if I never play another note, Theo." She sat looking down at the violin as though it were an alien thing put into her hands. Then she raised her eyes and smiled at him. "You didn't love me because I could play the violin, did you, Theo?" She did not often coquette with him; she had to a degree that was almost genius the faculty of tantalizing and at the same time satisfying her lover; and she had all a woman's instinctive defensiveness when love was in question.

"But you cannot let your music go to the wall like

that—because I love you.” It was almost as though he had added the last phrase on an after-thought. There was even a suggestion of irritation in his voice, the irritation of conflicting motives. “You have neglected it too long, as it is.” A strange impatience possessed him. The familiar room, even Elsa, did not seem quite real to him. He was not thinking of her, nor of her music. It was years since he had felt the actual physical impulse to create, in his hands. It was as if his spirit had been suddenly released from the outer trappings that had constrained it; with only high heaven above him as a measure of his stature.

Her eyes still coquetting with him, Elsa was considering the matter seriously. “But I’m far too busy with real things to have time for parlour accomplishments. It used to take such *hours*, Theo.”

Biran rose, sat down again, irresolutely. “All the more reason why you cannot let it all go for nothing. It is not as if you were a rank amateur.”

She laughed softly, flauntingly. “I’m content not to be even a rank amateur, or anything at all, but just me, here and now.”

“But one is not given a talent like yours just to chuck it away.”

She spoke to reassure him, not as if it concerned her at all. “I’m quite happy without it.”

Biran looked at Elsa balancing herself on the arm of the chair, the violin lying across her lap; and he came to sit near her. “Herr Zelinski predicted fame for you, a brilliant career, the world at your feet.”

Elsa laughed. “One famous member in the family is quite enough. Or we might take to quarrelling over our respective laurels.”

Now at last Biran gave his entire attention to Elsa. She was still smiling, but a new seriousness had fallen between them. Elsa spoke again. "I used to try so hard, Theo, and all Herr Zelinski ever said was 'Humph.' It was pretty discouraging sometimes. I don't think I'd like being an artist. I don't like being lonely and alone. I'd rather not, if you don't mind, Theo." Her glance flashed up from the tip of her slipper. "You see, Theo, I'm quite happy, and when one is happy—one does not care—for other things." She had put aside the violin some minutes before, and now she slipped from her place on the arm of the chair and into Biran's arms in a single swift movement. "You know—before I knew you—it was not just that I did not *know* how to play. I wonder what Herr Zelinski would have said to me then! and then when you came it wasn't the things you taught me to do with my fingers that really counted. It was the things you put into my heart, and that I used to make into music. That was all, really. And then you and Herr Zelinski were pleased that I played so well!" She threw back her head, her full throat swelling with her delicious laughter. "But now that I can say it to you so—and so—" Reaching up her mouth she kissed him lightly, and again, her hands on his shoulders, her slender figure pressed close to his, as if she would insinuate herself into his very heart, "—that I love you—" And roughly, strongly, Biran caught her to him.

She lay smiling up at him, confidently, like a child, confidently, as a woman secure in her love smiles at her lover. One hand had escaped his, and lay against his breast, between them, palm up . . . little hand that had suddenly looked empty to him. Then Biran kissed her,

her lips, her eyes, her slender firm throat where her dress left it free to his lips. He held her as though he would never let her go; kissed her with sudden rough vehemence at the thought of the time when her lips would no longer be his to kiss.

It was like the irony of life that he should, in this moment of all moments, become acutely aware of an added mysterious power in this girl upon whose future, beyond the day of their love, he had no claim. What was there about this Elsa that he was not content to love her as he had loved other women, and when the time came, each to go his way?—Why, after all, should he relinquish his right to love her? She did not want to play the violin, because she was happy. Body and soul, she was his. And because as she smiled at him he had seen in the curve of her lips, in the droop of an eyelash, the cool, firm texture of marble shaping under his hand, need he turn from the warm lips, the caress of her arms around his neck, all the sweet loveliness of the living woman? He looked down at the small pink palm, the curving fingers . . . as if she offered the gift of herself in the pink hollow of her hand. Then passion swept into his senses, and he felt only that she was here in his arms. Was it not still the day of their love? Elsa loved him. What matter how he loved Elsa, since he loved her?

He would do his work, and love his woman, as all the world had done before him, and would continue to do.

He bent his head and kissed the warm, rosy-moist palm; recaptured into his own the little empty hand.

Biran himself returned the violin to its case, stood

it in a corner beyond the piano. And indifferent in her renewed reassurance, Elsa had not troubled to exile it again to the dark closet under the stairs.

As the days grew warmer, they had their tea on the flagged doorstep, overlooking the garden. A growing restlessness in Biran frequently sent him walking among the neat paths, where he paced back and forth, or even wandered beyond the gate, while Elsa remained serenely watching the play of leaf-shadows over the white cloth on the table, and the birds twittering among the flowering bushes. Or returning from a solitary walk, he would find Elsa waiting tea for him, and cup in hand, he would take his ease in one of the deep chairs, conscious of a comfortable weariness after his walk, and a sense of well-being. And sometimes Elsa read to him, while he listened to the soft ripple of her voice, as often as not without hearing the words she read; and drank his tea, knowing himself for a lucky chap. It was a picture of tranquil domesticity; a man might very well pride himself on its possession. Then his glance went beyond the garden, past the gate, followed the road where it led past the cottage, saw it winding on and on, through open fields, in sunshine and shadow, until presently it wound among the trees and was lost to sight. . . .

Biran had finished his tea, but had forgotten to put down his cup. At Elsa's repeated question, he started. "Don't you think so, Theo?" He rose, put down his cup, and took a seat on the steps at her feet. "Of course, dear. But what?"

"Theo, you haven't been listening!"

He turned and kissed her hand where it lay on her lap. The last thing he remembered of the story Elsa

had been reading aloud was an impression that difficulties threatened the hero— On a chance, he said, "Well, you know, dear, it was something of a problem for the poor chap."

"If he had really loved her, Theo, there would not have been a problem."

Still not quite attending to what she said, and nibbling the rosy tips of her fingers, Biran's look embraced her. "That's a nice youthful way to dispose of a problem half the world's up against—to love or not to love."

Elsa disposed of that in a single phrase of finality. "People don't know *how* to love, Theo, that's all the trouble."

His eyes on the winding road, Biran answered thoughtfully. "It is not given to every man to love as he might choose to love."

Elsa shook her head. "Every one can love the best he knows how, Theo."

Biran smiled, inclined to be a little patronizing. "If life were so simple as that, child— It isn't. If there was any unity about a man's composition— But it so happens he has a soul and a mind, and a heart and a body, each clamouring its desires, demanding satisfaction, each ravaging the other and in its turn being ravaged—until all starve."

Elsa exclaimed triumphantly. "But that's what I said, you funny Big Bear dear! Only I didn't know how to say it. Why, even before I loved you I used to feel it. I used to think that if only somebody would take the silly world by its collar and shake it to make all the bewildered, lost people roll into their proper places—like the peas in a 'Pigs in Clover' puzzle, you know

—at least it would give some of us a chance to find our real places in life.

“It’s rather dreadful, dear, not to belong anywhere or to anybody in particular. That’s what’s the matter with lots of people—that’s why their souls and hearts, and all the rest of it—as you say—are never at peace. But if you love some one, that’s your place in the world—

“I remember, every time I used to see those silly little tin figures with only the front of them painted that men without legs sell on the streets, I used to say to myself, You are just like that—something has wound you up and set you going—and you’ll go on and on, just like the little tin men that get under your feet on the sidewalks, until you bump into something, and that’s the end of you—toes turned up to heaven.”

Biran laughed. But Elsa was serious. “You see, Theo, you never were a little tin man, so you can laugh. But you were the first person I had ever known that didn’t seem to me like a tin mannikin. I had no idea, until I knew you, that one did not have to be a tin mannikin if one could be something else. All the people I had ever known just went on doing this and not doing that— I used to wonder why I troubled to learn to play—and I didn’t know just how badly I played, either! It all made so little real difference, whether one did this or did not do that. And then I loved you, Theo. And that’s why I know I’m right about the hero in this story,” she ended triumphantly. Biran knew well her way of touching only upon the projecting points of an argument, of concerning herself only with the essentials of a situation. She seldom spoke of love to him

in words. She had curiously expressive silences, and curiously expressive little touches of her hands that made mere words banal between them. Biran did not interrupt her. He remained looking at her, his eyes narrowed on her face. "One doesn't make a problem of love until it becomes a question of ways and means, how to make not enough love seem like love that doesn't want to ask too much for itself. Real love never takes the longest way around, Theo." She laughed with delicious gaiety, all her seriousness suddenly fled. "That's why I'm sure nobody would ever want us for heroes in a story! There isn't a single blessed thing they could say about us except 'And they lived happily ever afterwards,' and there's no material in that for a problem." Her face leaning above him, suddenly tantalized Biran. But her hands on his shoulders kept him at her feet.

"And yet one might think we had our problems, Elsa." Biran had not meant to say it, but the words had been in his mind ever since Elsa had spoken of their love. She acquiesced at once. "I know, Theo." She laid her cheek for an instant against his hair. And in the slight impulse and gesture of reassurance, was the first revelation that Elsa had given even so much as a thought to their situation. "Of course people wouldn't understand about us—it's so simple—that you loved me and I loved you, and we are happy together." So, after all, it appeared she realized the situation. She spoke of it as simply as she spoke of their love, with a child-like directness that was yet wholly comprehending. Biran did not look at her. Without volition on his part the question asked itself,—she must then have given some

thought to the future? She met his eyes frankly, and he knew that she regretted, feared, nothing. She was leaning close above him and he drew her down into his arms; and kissed each eyelid shut over the look in her eyes; and thought no more of the future.

Presently a door closed somewhere in the house, and Biran lifted Elsa back into her chair, himself took a seat a little away from her. The picture was apparently unchanged. All was tranquil as before. Only now Biran's eyes dwelt on Elsa's profile instead of on the winding road, and on the facile sweep of her figure relaxed to follow the long lines of the deep garden chair; there was an uncanny repose in her motionless body, her still face, when she was not vitalized in action.—She would have made an admirable model. And when once she turned and smiled at him, Biran was suddenly, irritably conscious of an interruption, until she looked away again.

It continued to run as a little apprehensive fear in his mind, that Elsa would move suddenly, would become again the living woman with lovely eyes and distracting lips; and so destroy the delicate tentacles reaching through his consciousness. Less and less aware of her as the beloved woman, he was seeing her with eyes in which new vision quickened. In some far recess of his mind long, unworded thoughts were thinking themselves. And his eyes lingering upon each detail of the well-known allure of her face, remained unmoved by it. Anticipation, keen and sensuous, swept into his veins, of the cold touch of marble shaping under his hands; far more real to him in that moment than any thought of the living woman. . . . Only he would have her stand, slender and strong, that no graceful line of

body or limb be lost; subtly to reveal all the potentiality of her grace and youth, the power of fertility instinct in her woman's heart and body. And into her arms he would place a little child.

It was years since conception had come to him like that, in a wave of inspiration. Looking into the girl's eyes, he saw emerging out of the background of all the past months the something beyond, the something bigger, more comprehensive, more compelling, than a lovely girl with tantalizing lips; touching him more nearly even than the beloved woman holding the child of their love in her arms, would in that moment have been near to him. He remained very still, his look enveloping Elsa, while the vision became a tangible thing to his hands that would give it life. A woman and her child . . . symbol of all the love and meaning of life. Not . . . symbol of all the love and meaning of life. Not the fruit of his personal passion, a man's fancy for a pretty face; but the bond of their common lot that he would make visible before the eyes of all men. . . .

Like a great peace descending upon his soul, he felt the tangible power of creation flowing back into his fingers.

Divining his mood for silence, Elsa had remained scarcely less quiet than Biran himself.

The sun no longer shone upon the little garden. There was a slight chill in the air; and when presently the maid came to take away the tea tray, Elsa drew herself out of the long chair with a playful shiver. Biran too had risen, and when Elsa said she would get a wrap and they could go for a wee-bit walk before it was quite dark, he let her go, but before she had passed

through the door he said suddenly and without explanation, "Elsa—have dinner without me—there's a good girl—"

He left her standing alone on the flagged doorstep, and went quickly down into the faintly odorous garden, and so out into the road that wound away from the cottage, into solitary spaces beyond.

CHAPTER XVI

TWO days later, Biran went again to walk alone in the woods. He had kissed Elsa and left her standing by the big window in the music room, and had come away without looking back, without even a thought of Elsa watching him from the window, to distract him. He walked quickly, with a purposeful step, drawing the deep, slow breaths of one who feels life quickening at the very centres of one's being; yet now and again his glance brooded on the path, and his step lagged; as the cold and heat of warring emotions tormented his spirit.

Spring was no longer a promise in the air, but a fulfilment. The woods were deeply, densely green. But Biran, meditatively swinging his walking stick, saw neither the trees leafing overhead, nor gave a thought to the passing of fair days. A night, and a day, and another night, were gone since the twilight when he had walked out of the garden, and left Elsa alone for half the night. And today again he had not resisted the impulse when it came to him, to be alone; but the high mood of exultation that had made him lose sense of time and actuality, had not returned upon him; only the memory of it lingered, like the gracious warmth of a living touch. Again, now, he sought to recapture the exalted emotion of that night when in the dark quietness the excluding wall of worldly thoughts had suddenly vanished from about his spirit, leaving it free of earth. He had seemed to see life in its entirety, and not as a man is wont to see it, in narrow cross-sections of

his personal affairs. It had come to him like a flash of revelation that his love for the girl Elsa had been the white-hot flame to purge him of the grosser passions of the flesh, to temper his soul and body to the needful purity and sensitiveness, to make him again worthy of his God-given gift of creation. Strange, inconsequent thoughts exalted him. Yet always it had been Elsa who was at the heart of his emotion, Elsa with her responsive eyes and sweet, tender mouth; and there had arisen before his inner vision a revelation of the mystery of Life, of the Woman, who was the matrix of life, and he beheld her in the image of a slender, smiling girl, holding a child in her arms, and within her heart and body all the future of the world. Then, the first acute impulse of exaltation somewhat spent, it seemed his consciousness was not quite purged of the reality of Elsa. Fleeting thoughts of her wove subtly into his high mood; slowly her girl-face emerged from the mask of marble, and the memory of her eyes smiling at him companioned him in the night. The sky had been alight with stars; and presently through the darkness, he saw the light in her window.

It shone through the intervening trees, lighting a path to her, while the little pulse in his temple wakened and love lured him. All of life seemed to be in solution. Then he had turned his back on the house, plunging into the darkness and solitude of the woods, there to pass the remaining hours of the night.

And today again he walked alone in the woods. . . .

Over and over again he said it to himself, that had Elsa, of their love, given him a child. . . . But she had put upon him even a greater debt of gratitude. She might well have kept for herself the joy and travail

of giving him a physical child, a child of his flesh and blood and love, but instead she had renewed the gift of life in him, her lover; had transfused all her warmth and loveliness and her woman's power of fertile love into an inspiration that quickened with conception his heart and mind, that he might bring forth into the world this new creation of his genius.

The sun was high overhead before Biran took toll of the hour. He came back to earth with the reflection that he was late for luncheon, and hastening his steps reached his gate at the same time as the small boy who brought the letters to the cottage. Biran glanced at his two letters indifferently; there was, as usual, nothing for Elsa, who neither wrote nor received letters. And it was not until later when, seated at the luncheon table, something in this slightly absurd incident of the letters suddenly appeared to him a trivial, appalling thing—

He lighted a cigarette, and asked Elsa to name a day when she could be ready to return to town. He did not want to hurry or coerce her, but with its acknowledgment his impatience grew in leaps and bounds. The need to work was making itself felt in his very fingers. The cottage suddenly oppressed him. He longed for the big, bare spaces of his work room; and without previous intention he had spoken to Elsa of their return to the world.

Elsa, her chin propped on her interlaced fingers, her bare, round elbows on the table, looked back at him across the length of the luncheon table, and said no word of surprise or dismay or objection. But crushed into that first silent moment were all the memories of their life at the cottage, mirrored in her eyes. She accepted, rather than acquiesced, by her silence. It was

the last thing in the world she had expected to hear from Biran, that he was thinking of returning to town, of a life away from the cottage. Yet she too must have known that this happy time could not endure forever, and perhaps she too looked forward to the prosaic life of the world that was waiting for them just beyond the door of the cottage. She had learned many things while she seemed to be playing, and her hands too, were ready and eager for their work. Playtime over, they would find a thousand and one ways in which to serve her love and lover. For Elsa too had dreamed her dreams, while she busied herself about this and that household task, or sat idly dreaming while Biran played to her. She said it aloud at last, a little regretfully, "It has been such a happy time, Big Bear dear."

So it was decided. It remained only to name the day of their return to town. But as there was no more reason to hasten than to delay their departure, they gave themselves another week at the cottage, and after the necessary arrangements had been made, they did not speak again of the impending change. Together they took all their favourite walks—for the last time, although the word was never spoken between them; and returning, they would linger in the garden, loath to admit that another day was gone. But the day came at last when the trunks had been brought from the storeroom and were being packed, the doors between the rooms left wide open, while Elsa and Biran kept up a merry badinage, each busy in his own room. Elsa was methodically arranging the contents of the various drawers in neat piles on the bed, when Biran appeared in the doorway. "Elsa, this is yours, isn't it?" He held out a book, closed over a paper knife, and Elsa

looked at him, looked at the book, not quite understanding at first. Then she came forward and took the book from his hand, and drawing the paper knife from between the leaves, held it out to him. She had been reading her book in his room, and had used his paper knife, and now he was packing his things into his trunk. . . .

When Biran had returned to the other room, she remained for a moment where she stood, holding the book in her hands, while her look went around the room; from the little table by the bed, to the dressing table; presently she went to the dressing table and picked out a silver bottle engraved with Biran's initials, and a silver brush of which she had taken immediate possession upon discovery; then crossing to the closet, she took out a quilted silk robe they had both agreed was more becoming to her than it was to its owner; and carried all the things she had collected into her arms, in to Biran, and carefully folded the silk robe to go into the trunk, while man-like Biran tumbled in the brush and the silver bottle without glancing at them; and sat back on his heels to wait for the silk robe. Apparently he attached no significance to this division of their personal belongings, and when Elsa said, bending over the trunk to arrange the robe, "There are all those things downstairs, Theo," he answered indifferently, "What you do not want you might chuck over to the maids"; and so disposed of their Lares and Penates.

Biran finished his task first, and sitting at the foot of Elsa's bed, waited for her to be done with her packing. Her silent preoccupation with her work left him nothing to do but to watch the strong pliant lines of her figure as she knelt before the trunk, or reached among the various piles and boxes grouped about her on the

floor. This absorption in the affair of the moment was as characteristic of Elsa as was Biran's habit of getting a thing over and done with, so he could be about something else. Elsa had never posed for him, and a little guilty sense told him this was not the moment to think of sketching pad and pencil, although why exactly he could not have said; perhaps there is something inherent in the mere sight of trunks that recalls the poignancy of departure, of parting; no word had been said, even no thought thought, that remotely suggested such a possibility, yet it came to Biran that this was virtually the moment of their parting. The thought came to him without volition on his part; he felt the disloyalty to Elsa, that at such a moment he should be thinking of the artistic possibilities of her pose; then Elsa sighed, and stretched her tired arms with an indolently graceful gesture that made Biran almost call out to her not to move, until he had gotten a sketch down on paper— Then suddenly he saw that Elsa *was* tired, that her eyes looked very large in the small face; and if her eyelashes covered her eyes, hiding their look from him, her very attitude confessed her weariness. He took her into his arms, and held her as one holds a weary child; scolding gently that she had worn herself out with the packing, which Marthe could have done for her. And after a little, when the tears had escaped from under the lowered lashes and been kissed away, Elsa said she would let the maid finish, after all, and they would keep these last hours for themselves, without a thought for other things.

But it had been a trying day, and the evening in the music room depressed them unaccountably. For after all, it *was* the last evening. . . . On the final stroke of

ten, Elsa rose and announced, rather determinedly, that she was tired and was going to bed. Biran retained her hand for a moment and, kissing it, did not detain her. "It is an early start tomorrow," he agreed.

He said good-night to her at the door of the music room. This time he kissed her lips, and kissed her again, a little brusquely, then let her go from him, up the dim stairs, alone. He did not turn away at once, stood for a moment looking after her while like a white shadow she passed out of his sight; still he remained listening to her footsteps, slowly ascending, until he could no longer hear the funny little click her high heels made on the polished floor. Perhaps he wanted to go after her, perhaps he wanted to make quite sure she would not return. . . . He was glad to be alone; yet he suddenly, tangibly, felt his loneliness. Then he turned from the stairs and went out into the dark veranda, ashamed of his mood. Deliberately, he directed his thoughts to the future. The few hours of a night already half spent, and it would be tomorrow. Tomorrow, a new life awaited them both. He would have his work, and Elsa her career. . . .

After all, the decision had not rested in his hands. A compulsion more compelling than the warm loveliness of this girl who had quickened life in him tingled to his very finger-tips. Already it was a living thing in his heart and soul and brain, the dream prisoned in marble, to which he would give life in the image of the living woman. . . . But it was not yet tomorrow. Tomorrow he would enter into his kingdom whence nothing could tempt or distract him; but tonight he was a man who wanted love and the beloved woman as perhaps he had never wanted her before. With the knowledge that

nothing could turn or detain him from the single absorption of purpose that, whether he would or no, had fastened its compulsion upon him,—was it the last fitful flicker of the flame?—that the thought of Elsa was like fire in his veins. With the memory of Elsa turning to smile at him from the head of the stairs, before his eyes, Biran fought his demon. And when at last sheer weariness exacted toll of the body, he returned into the house, carefully extinguished the lights, went cautiously upstairs, softly past her door, fearful lest he waken Elsa. . . .



PART III



CHAPTER XVII

THEIR return to town was as inconspicuous as their departure had been. They spent the first night in an obscure hotel, and breakfasted in their rooms. After the profound quiet of the cottage, the ceaseless noise of the city streets excited Elsa, and with the distracted impatience of a child who cannot see all three rings at the circus at the same time, she finished dressing as best she might, torn between the mirror and the window. Life was always a glorious adventure to her; and Biran, already seated at the little table laid for breakfast and that on Elsa's appeal had been placed close to the windows, waited with amused patience. If he had been somewhat surprised at her calm acceptance of his decision to leave the cottage, to return to town, he was greatly relieved that Elsa showed no inclination to waste regrets over the past. Or perhaps she was more worldly-wise than he had supposed. At all events, had he said to her that they were to leave for Timbuctoo on the afternoon train, she would as calmly have answered that she would be ready for the afternoon train; nor would the reality of Timbuctoo have dismayed her. Truth to tell, her lover had never quite understood this unquestioning docility. It was not that Elsa was without spirit. But she had once said simply that she always *wanted* to do what he wanted her to do; had she not come with him to the cottage, gladly, happily? It was very simple.

She came to kiss Biran presently, in a little flutter of lace and ribbons, and took her place demurely enough, opposite him at the table, and poured his coffee.

All in all, breakfast was a very merry affair. The moment of awkwardness came when the breakfast things had been removed, and Biran's cigarette lighted, he looked at his watch.

Under the ordinary circumstances of recently arriving in town, to look at one's watch is the usual preliminary for the discussion of one's plans for going out. Elsa, her chin as usual propped in the palm of her hand, looked at Biran while he looked at his watch. Returning the watch to his pocket, Biran said, "Ten o'clock"; a bit of lint on his coat sleeve caught his eye, so he did not look at Elsa as he said casually, as if continuing a conversation, "You were comfortable at Mrs. Hester's, were you not?" It was at Mrs. Hester's that Elsa had lived when she first came to New York.

Elsa said, "Oh, perfectly."

Her glance did not waver. But she had not realized it would be so soon, any change in the details of their life, although she must have known she could not go with Biran to his studio-lodgings. She knew her lover was a man of many friends and interests, nor did she grudge him any of these; she trusted him implicitly; he would of course want what was best for them both; did they not love each other? The world would pry and be curious, because her lover was one of its favourites; she knew that, too. So if Mrs. Hester's was the solution he had decided upon to meet all exigencies . . . Nevertheless, at this unexpected mention of Mrs. Hester's, something of the brightness went out of the morning for Elsa. For an instant she hesitated. "Will you

come too?" She did not mean to bargain, but she was disturbed, a little distressed. She understood it must be Mrs. Hester's, but she waited for Biran to reassure her. He smiled, not quite frankly. "You know I will come—often." So he did not intend to come with her. But she must have known already that he could not, to Mrs. Hester's. So she accepted, with what good grace she could command, the necessity of the apparent separation. But she made one plea. "Isn't it—very far?" She meant far from the studio; for half the city lay between; and she knew that the studio was the other love in her lover's life.

"No farther than it was before, goosie," Biran laughed more frankly. "I should say it was even nearer—now." He was grateful to Elsa for being reasonable. She had never disappointed him; but he was, none the less, relieved now that that unpleasant bit of discussion was over and done with. There had been an element of crisis at this point of their affairs; therefore he was very matter of fact when he mentioned Mrs. Hester, and treated the whole matter briskly. He rose, arranged his waistcoat; looked about the room for his hat. For there was much to be done, and the morning was already well on its way. Elsa too had risen, and they stood looking at each other uncertainly for a moment; then Biran asked her if she had seen his hat in the other room. She went for it, and returning, stood before him, carefully brushing off imaginary bits of lint from the hat she held in her hands. Then she looked up at him. "Theo—I won't ask to come to the studio—but—you didn't mean—you were going to leave me—alone—at Mrs. Hester's?"

It was as near as they had ever come to a scene, a

misunderstanding. Biran detested scenes; and Elsa had never yet approached one; she did not now; but he saw in her eyes the dawning of a new expression, an understanding, it might almost be, a fear; and in the moment while the question grew in her eyes, subtly, the very substance of their relation seemed to alter. He had said no word to her, ever, to make her aware of her position; but now she said she would not ask to come to the studio; was she thinking to be his back-door love? that she offered to make terms with him. Troubled by his own awareness of it, he was annoyed that Elsa should admit her consciousness of the irregularity of their situation. It was the first time he had thought of Elsa, as a woman to whom a man might come for love. Once before he had put the treacherous thought from him of a day when he would kiss Elsa with the knowledge in his heart that it was the last time. But he would then have kissed her, and gone away. . . .

Biran had risen from his chair at the breakfast table moved by the same orderly sequence of thought, of intention, that had actuated all his decisions and movements up to that moment, to the one end of getting their affairs into proper order as quickly as might be. It was not that he had become tired of Elsa; it was only that his life had returned to its wonted channels again. His glance had become more and more withdrawn from the outside world. Love had had its day; new forces, new powers, quickened into a sense of living. All his thoughts and emotions, hopes and desires, were concentrated within the big bare spaces of his work room; where he would soon be at work. And he had spoken to Elsa of Mrs. Hester's as a man who puts his affairs into order in preparation for a long voyage into

distant countries; at Mrs. Hester's, Elsa would be safe and comfortable.

But he was looking down at her hand where it lay on his arm, white and delicate; and he said to himself he should have known it could not be so simple as that—to use Elsa's own phrase; and Elsa herself had said she would not ask to come to the studio. After all, did not that single phrase best solve their problem for them? She would of course have to come to the studio for the hours while he needed her for his work; but that was not what she meant when she said she would not ask to come to the studio. Warm and soft, her arm crept around his neck. He knew the time had come when he should have kissed her hand where it lay on his arm, and left her. Instead, he took her into his arms, and kissed her, knowing he would return again—to kiss her. She had never resisted him, had never sought to hold him; even now she did not plead, nor entreat, nor make any demand upon him; she said no word; but he felt her heart beating strongly against his; and while her lips waited her eyes asked, Would he leave her now? In the brief instant that he still did not kiss her, they seemed to be making terms; and the thought in the man's mind was that when the day's work in the big bare studio was done, there were more hours in a day than a man needed for his work. . . . Then he took Elsa in his arms, and kissed her.

Elsa looked up at him with a little wavering smile. She was suddenly self-conscious before him, for the first time aware of a new power in herself, of reluctance in her lover, that she must win from him by the soft compelling of her arms; she even snatched an instant to be glad she had worn that particular morning gown,

with its filmy laces, to enhance whatever of beauty she had in her lover's eyes. Without defining it to herself, she had become aware of a hesitation, a preoccupation, in Biran. And instinctively she had found a way to combat, to dispel it. That was all. But what before had been freely hers, she now must win and keep.

Biran took up his hat from the table. "Perhaps you had better not unpack. I'll go around to Mrs. Hester's the first thing; and come back for you."

But he went first to the studio. He had his latch-key, and let himself in as if he were returning after an absence of an hour. He rang for his man, and Wilkes greeted him with respectful nonchalance, exactly as though Biran had been away for the night. And the rooms had the same appearance; he might have been there the evening before. There were fresh cigarettes in the box on the smoking stand, and no dust on the polished surface of the piano, while the books and papers on the table looked as if they had been recently tossed aside; Wilkes had had the good sense not to leave around a litter of unopened letters, and smudgy cards. Biran experienced a deep sense of content; on entering the studio he took up his life exactly where he had abruptly broken it off when he went away with Elsa. And when in a moment Wilkes re-entered unobtrusively upon his meditations, he said to him, "By the way, Wilkes, I'll be in for dinner tonight," just as he had said it a hundred and one times before.

With equal impassivity the man uttered his subdued, "Very well, sir." He stood waiting to render an accounting, not obtruding it upon Biran, but with an air that said he was there, if his master chose to take cog-

nizance of the fact. Biran paused on his way to his work room. On second thought he decided to leave the work room until tomorrow, or until tonight, after dinner. Then he would have the whole evening—"Well?" he said to the man. He crossed to the smoking stand, and took up the silver box, with interest inspecting its contents. "A new kind, eh?" Wilkes coughed discreetly. "I believe, sir, they are very fine. The lady said she particularly recommended them, with her compliments, if you please, sir." He held a light for Biran, who asked, "What lady?"

"Miss Noreen, sir." And as Biran neither dismissed nor questioned him, he added, "The lady says this is the only quiet place in the city, sir, where she could be alone. The lady mostly reads aloud to herself."

Biran restrained a smile. "Certainly. I hope you made her comfortable." So Noreen was studying a new part. . . .

"Yes, sir. I did my best, sir."

Biran had taken up the silver box again, and stood regarding it thoughtfully. He was not thinking of the box. It had suddenly occurred to him that it would be—well, stimulating—and very pleasant, to be again dining with Noreen, to watch the imperious tilt of her chin, while she smoked one of these gold-crested cigarettes, and listen to her slumberous voice uttering half-spoken sentences, as if they had spoken with each other but yesterday. He knew she would rightly have interpreted his sudden departure; and that she would not have given his disappearance another thought until he returned among his friends; that when he presented himself before her she would be glad to see him, while in all probability not more than an amused thought of him

had crossed her mind in all these months of his absence. Likewise he knew he could send her a note asking her to dine, and that she would disregard any engagement she might have for the evening. But he also knew that were he to disappear off the face of the earth, she would murmur a regret for the loss of talent in his person, and continue to dine, and to look over the rim of her wine glass at her companion, with that look in her eyes he knew so well, and that accorded to each man his just due of favour, no more and no less. That she had always been kind to him, Biran knew was his good fortune, and not any right he had gained for himself. His friendship gave him the right to no more than that she would be glad to see him, and would come to dine with him, ignoring other obligations. "That will do," he said suddenly to Wilkes, who still waited. "Dinner at seven, as usual. I'll be alone."

The door opened and closed noiselessly, as it had opened and closed upon the man's soft-footed comings and goings ever since Biran had made a home for himself in these rooms, under the supervision of Wilkes' soft-spoken, "Very good, sir."

Presently, Biran found himself in the street again, hailing a taxicab. It was high time he went about the business of the day, and Elsa would expect him to return to lunch with her. He made a quick dash to Mrs. Hester's, who was volubly glad to see him, and remembered the young lady perfectly. In short, Mrs. Hester seemed to understand everything too readily. She appeared to be sparing Biran the necessity of explanations he had no intention of making to her. But she had said at once that the young lady could have her old rooms, yes, that very afternoon; and Biran, in his turn, had made

liberal arrangements with her. He knew the woman was being kind, and lady-like, in her best manner, and that she was stretching a point of policy and morals in his behalf. But he could not say to her that his relations to the pretty young lady were not at all what she thought they were. And if Mrs. Hester chose to receive Elsa under her roof on the terms that she could not refuse him a favour, he was in no position to resent her reassuring manner. None the less, it was an unpleasant experience. He felt crumpled in spirits. The woman's careful speech and his own acceptance of it, seemed in some way to wrong Elsa. He swore softly and forcibly to himself, as he re-entered the taxi. Could he have regarded Elsa frankly as his mistress, as the world would naturally regard her, there would be no occasion for annoyance, no need to smart under the well-meant blunders of Mrs. Hester's euphemisms. The gist of the matter was that Elsa was not that kind of woman, and that she was, exactly, in that kind of position. On his way back to her, Biran caught himself defining Elsa's place in his life. He conceded that he loved her, whereas he had not really, or at least in just this way, loved before. But that fact did not alter the dictum of the world that he was, in the more obvious sense, the girl's lover. Fresh from his interview with Elsa's prospective landlady he realized that during the night and day since they had come away from the cottage their relation had not altered so much as admitted itself a relation that had to be arranged for, and if not explained, at least safeguarded from the need of explanations. At the cottage they had been known simply by his name; with Elsa at Mrs. Hester's, they would resume their separate identities. As for Elsa, she would have to brave the

curious eyes of all the persons she met, or there was the alternative of clandestine visits to the studio that her own words had suggested. Otherwise she could hardly avoid meeting young VanSmythe, for instance; of course, if she had been what VanSmythe believed her to be, there would be no situation to face.

Insidiously, the thought obtruded itself upon him, that Elsa herself had defined her place in their future. He recalled his parting from her a few hours ago, and in a way, it seemed to relieve him of responsibility.

It was a long ride back to the hotel, and to Elsa. He looked out upon the crowded ugly streets, the press of humanity, the drab buildings, and the bit of drab sky overhead; and the tension of his thoughts eased. Leaning forward to look out of the window upon the arid, inexpressive faces of the multitude, he fell into his old habit of silent musing, the indulgence of one who is much alone; for despite its varied aspect, the greater part of Biran's life had been solitary. He never allowed intrusion upon his working hours; and looking back over the years he would truly have said that the working hours *were* his life. Naturally, there had been interludes—often recurring periods when he did not go near the work room—but he did not take these episodic occurrences very seriously, although he would have told you, frankly, that they were the bread and wine he set forth in offering before the artist's soul and need that was the god in him. Now and again some fragment of street life held his attention; and when at a corner a group of children caught his glance he looked at them with a sudden, keen interest. Strangely enough, he had never sculptured a child; then his glance was arrested by a woman's eyes on his face while she paused on the

sidewalk; their unquiet look recalled to him the tragedy of another woman's life, and a memory of warm, summer skies; for he had known the other woman all through the long hot months of a Roman summer, while he immortalized in marble the tragedy in her face. And when the summer was done, she had passed out of his life, even as the woman on the sidewalk had already passed out of his sight. He sat back in the corner of the cab, withdrew his glance from the street. Would he never, to the end of his days, escape this creeping sense of loneliness? It was this very impersonality of his emotions that in the old days had plunged him into all manner of excesses, physical, spiritual, emotional, in a vain search for the emotion that would wholly possess him, fuse his whole being into a single point of sensation. There had been in his life many moments when mere earth receded from beneath his feet and heaven was within reach, but he had never quite lost the touch of earth, nor quite grasped heaven. Like seed sown into fertile soil, life impregnated his mind; every fleeting dream, every reality he experienced, every debauch or exultation of his senses, would come to fruit in some concrete thought that in their turn his hands would render visible before the eyes of mankind. Today, as always, the sight and sound of the passing throngs quickened the blood in his veins. Thought became fluent. He experienced a return of the old feeling of tremendous possibilities, when horizons receded before his vision, and the sole measure of a man's achievement was the measure of the man himself. Following hard upon the moment of depression, exultation surged through him, beat in a quick pulse in his temple, as he looked forward to the arduous days, already anticipating with

keen joy the actual physical fatigue of long hours in his work room, when his arm would ache with a thousand exquisite pains and tortures of over-strained muscles; the driving exaltation of the day that would leave him weary and happy and eager for the morning; days and weeks that passed with the swift calm of a bird on the wing; and then one day the Thing that had been growing into life under his hands would be revealed in its completeness,—a thought or a dream, some emotion of the human heart and mind,—he would have caught it into the indestructibility of marble. . . . This was the only real heredity. For everything in the heart and soul and mind of the artist that was lasting and real, and so of any worth, lived again in the work of his hands that remained to posterity. A man's children were far more often alien to him; while in every pressure of the artist's thumb, in each movement of the palm modelling the clay, some part of the man himself was impressed and made to live again, in the perpetual life of the sculptured marble.

A jeweller's clock, glimpsed in passing, recalled the hour to him, and Biran's thoughts reverted to more immediate affairs. On second thought he decided not to return to the studio that evening to dine alone. Without quite knowing why, he felt a little guilty about Elsa. On the whole, he could make no adequate excuse why he should leave her alone that evening. She knew they had returned to town because he wanted to be at work again; but he could not explain that he looked forward to the solitude of the studio as one might crave abstemious fare after a surfeit of cloying sweets. He admitted he had been a selfish brute even to think of leaving her to a solitary dinner and a lonely evening.

Suddenly Biran wakened to the slow progress of the taxi, and spoke sharply to the driver.

Elsa had unpacked in her old rooms at Mrs. Hester's, and was "at home" as she informed Biran with a courtesy from the doorway of her bedroom, by tea-time that afternoon; so they had tea together, at the same little round table where Elsa had first so timidly offered him hospitality. She was very gay over the tea cups; and she put her elbows on the table almost immediately, as Biran waited for her to do. Curiously, he had a feeling that a long time had passed since he had seen her, and he watched for this and that familiar little trick of manner, as if he were seeing her after a long absence. He had been away from her for perhaps four hours; and now that all danger of it was past, he knew he had been afraid that she might disappoint him; that she might look at him over her laced fingers, and that the mystery, the allurements of her look would be gone. Disregarding the barrier of the tea table, he leaned across it and kissed her forearm. He had actually questioned if her charm was not, after all, the fancy of his imagination. But he was glad he had telephoned to Wilkes not to expect him at the studio.

The strange familiarity of the room created a complex atmosphere. He was grateful to Elsa that she appeared, at least, to experience no ill-ease. She had playfully assumed the rôle of hostess, and so discounted his feeling of being merely a guest at her tea table; they were getting over this first difficult moment with more felicity than Biran had dared to hope—when suddenly and without warning they found themselves confronting each other across an arid silence. It was Elsa who in-

stantly managed a smile. But her eyes said to him, in a little flashing look, It was not nearly so nice as it had been at the cottage, was it, Big Bear dear? And Biran's eyes could not but promise that it would be quite as nice, as soon as they became a bit more accustomed to their new situation. Then, thing unheard of, Elsa cried a little; and rubbing her nose against Biran's shoulder confessed she was a silly; and that she had wanted to cry ever since they left the cottage. After that, they both felt better; and Biran sent Elsa to change her dress. He had suddenly decided that the sparkle and gaiety of dinner and many lights and music was the best antidote for their touch of gloom—and a good way to dispose of the evening. Besides, they would sooner or later have to adjust themselves to the new order; and it would be easier to part from Elsa at Mrs. Hester's door, than deliberately to get up and go away.

For the few minutes that Elsa was out of the room, he prowled from pillar to post like a caged animal seeking egress. He had not known there were bonds upon him until he had suddenly and unexpectedly strained against them. He came at last to the outer door; and an ironical smile broke the set look of his lips. Across the room, through the other door, he could see Elsa putting on her hat. Then he went to help her with her wraps.

CHAPTER XVIII

ALWAYS reticent about his work, Biran laboured in secret and silence, jealous even of the model who must share his work with him. Somewhat reluctantly, he let Elsa into the secret of his conception for the new statue. Briefly and haltingly, he explained the pose to her,—a young mother holding her child in her arms,—and she understood all he wanted to say, on the half-word, as she always understood. He was to begin work at once, and it was arranged that she should come to the studio every morning. Swift comprehension in her eyes, body and heart she promised herself to the work. She had no artistic knowledge, but it was as if her comprehension went beyond his words, to the very core of his inspiration. And in spite of himself, of his artist's jealousy, Biran warmed under the warmth of her enthusiasm. She possessed to an extraordinary degree the power to render him more susceptible to new and fruitful emotions, to rouse within him a realization of greater possibilities. But quite as well Biran knew she was thinking far less of the work than of the worker, and it distracted him, in the middle of his rare confidences, to find her eyes fixed on his face while her thoughts wandered in a trance of memory. He stopped short; while Elsa, instantly contrite, offered such reparation for her inattention as must have won his forgiveness; and once she asked him, raising her eyes from a sketch he had been making of the pose, If he had ever wished for a child of his own. Biran, conscious of the rush

of confusion to his face, crushed the sketch into his pocket, and moved quickly away from her. A moment later he abruptly opened the door into his work room, and motioned Elsa to enter. Perhaps it was his answer to her, or a stern measure with himself.

The steel frame for the group was already in place; today he would begin work; and he would brook no distraction; the time would come soon enough when Elsa would thank him that he had not wanted a child of his own. . . . Then, perhaps, when it was too late, he would regret his decision of that other day. Now he wanted only to work.

Elsa had never been in the work room. She stopped in the doorway and looked around this holy of holies in her lover's life, from which he had so long excluded her, where he now admitted her almost grudgingly. Aware of her look, Biran chose to ignore its import. "You didn't think I could work in the other room, did you?" He was pulling a low dais into position under the skylight. "A man could not work in there." He tossed his head in the direction of the studio. "There's too much stuff about—too much velvet—too many easy chairs—it stifles. If you'll come here now."—He interrupted himself to summon Elsa; and when she had taken her place on the dais, he arranged her in the pose he held so perfectly in his mind and memory; then stood off to view the result; came back to straighten a fold of her dress; all as if she had been a lay figure. "A man wants only his hands, and bare walls to shelter him, while he does his work." . . . He spoke in intermittent sentences, intent upon his own thoughts. Then he put a small dummy into Elsa's arms, to get the necessary droop to her figure under the weight of a child, as she

would hold it in her arms; and Elsa bent her head as if to look into the answering eyes of a little child. Biran, chalking lines on the dais, asked anxiously, "Will you be able to hold the pose?" and she answered, "Yes."

"When the time comes that I need it we'll have to borrow a baby somewhere." And again Elsa answered, "Yes." In a moment Biran had taken his first handful of clay, and the work was begun.

During the short periods of rest he allowed Elsa, Biran continued to work, silent, absorbed, without a thought to spare away from the clay shaping under his hands. And when Elsa had rested, she would return to the dais. When she realized that the interruptions annoyed and retarded him, she rested less often, and presently learned to take the pose without help. The mornings passed quickly. The pose allowed her to watch Biran at his work; while the sculptor himself was working more surely and swiftly than he remembered having worked since the early days of his success. It seemed he was never fatigued; and he worked with a relentless force that Elsa had never suspected in the leisurely, indolent man she had known during their months of companionship. Sometimes, stealing a glance at his face, she sought to re-picture it to herself, to recall before her eyes some tender, amused expression she had known so well on the face of her lover; but the stern face bending over the mass of clay baffled her; and when once she caught Biran's eye, and smiled, he did not respond to her smile. He was at the moment working on the nose of the sculptured face, and he frowned impatiently that the model's features had been discomposed; stepping back, he waited for her to resume the expression.

So Elsa learned not to smile at him while he worked. Instead, she told herself that the better and longer she kept the pose, the sooner he would finish the work. But Biran remarked the slight rigidity of her tired muscles almost at once, and had been a little severe with her. He needed pliancy of pose, not strained and stiffened attitudes. So after that, she took her allotted periods of rest meekly, lying relaxed on the broad, hard sofa, as Biran directed her to do, without a glance in her direction. And she soon saw it annoyed him if she came to stand by his elbow, watching him at work. Even before that, she had understood that he did not like her to recall herself, to his attention; that if she ventured to remind him of her presence by any of the little arts and charms he had been wont to love in her, he now counted it an intrusion, impatient of any distraction away from his work. She knew he did not mean to be unkind, so she forgave him, and contented herself waiting for the time when he would again have eyes for her.

As the clay figure grew and shaped under his hands into her image, she wondered if he really saw all that he portrayed in the face of the sculptured woman, in her, Elsa's, face. In the long silent hours she came to feel an awe of Biran himself, something of the same awe she had felt in his presence when he had been to her the great artist and master. In the intimacy of their love, she had all but forgotten that her lover was the great and famous artist. . . .

Biran usually continued work in the afternoon, but he seldom kept Elsa beyond the morning, and when he did not need her to pose, he closed the door of the work room on her without a qualm. So she was left either to

return to her own rooms at Mrs. Hester's, or to wait in the studio, among the too-much velvet and the too-many chairs; but if she waited in the studio, Biran sometimes remembered she was there.

So far as Elsa was concerned, she remained as much alone with Biran in the world as she had been alone with him at the cottage. For when it was known among his familiars that the sculptor was at work, they waited to be asked to come to the studio; and Miss Noreen was on tour in the West. And on the rare occasions when Biran decreed a holiday, they spent it out of doors, he and Elsa alone together,—an idle, unexact day under open skies,—while the artist recuperated his forces. Thus the routine of the busy weeks was undisturbed, and Elsa spared any awkward encounters. For Biran wanted only to work; and work done for the day, he was quite happy with Elsa. She had just held a match to light his cigarette and still stood before him, smiling at him over her hand that he retained in his own, and that still held the burning match. Then Biran extinguished the match, presently threw away the freshly lighted cigarette. But Elsa would not give herself into his arms. She still smiled, but she was not to be cajoled. "You love me when we are in here together, don't you, Theo? but when I am in the other room with you I might just as well be the dummy I have to hold in my arms."

Biran kissed her hand. "There's a way a man loves a woman, beloved, and the way he loves his work."

Elsa nodded. "Yes. And I am like the velvet and the too-many chairs. Do I stifle you too, Theo?"

He punished her for that; and Elsa's arms clung about his neck. "I know it's wicked of me, but some-

times I can't help wishing you weren't famous and a great artist and all those public things, but just somebody plain and ordinary whom nobody ever heard of, and that we really had to live in a tiny bit of a place somewhere way far off, and raise cabbages in the back garden!"

"That's a nice ambitious way for *you* to talk, when some day you will be famous yourself."

Elsa laughed. "Isn't it funny you ever thought I could be a celebrity! Poor dear Zelinski really thought I'd turn out to be a genius. I'm afraid he was dreadfully disappointed, Theo. And I didn't even say good-bye to him—I suppose I should have said good-bye to him."

Slowly Biran recalled his glance from the shadowy spaces of the room, and because he was not giving much heed to her words, he raised her fingers to his lips.

"I passed by his house the other day, and I walked on tip-toe, actually, for fear he'd dash out and capture me."

Biran laid her hand on his palm, studying it closely. "Why do you not go in and see him some day? You know he liked you almost as much as he was proud of your playing. Go in some day."

But Elsa shook her head. "He wouldn't understand. You see, Theo, Herr Zelinski thinks his life is ruined and wasted because he used to dream of playing concerts, and of ovations, and long notices in the papers, and his name in everybody's mouth—*you* know. And he is quite sure he made a dreadful mistake because he loved his wife instead. So you see he couldn't understand about us. He would want me to go back to the horrible practising, to give my life to the music, Theo,

because *he* hadn't, and because he's been so dreadfully unhappy about it on his own account. He told me. He used to say to me, 'It is no use at all, Fräulein, unless ones gives one's all to the music.' That is what he wanted *me* to do—" Her eyebrows, the swift play of her eyes, the little half-smile on her lips, all said how absurd it was of Herr Zelinski. . . .

Biran's attitude had suddenly become less negligent. Something in Elsa's words recalled him from the depths of his aloofness from the lesser realities, as all things other than his work now seemed to him. The time would come when his ambition for Elsa would reassert itself; but now he was deliberately allowing her talent to lie fallow, warmed and nourished by life itself. Her unexpected reference to Zelinski left him momentarily disconcerted. She took it so for granted that he, Biran, would understand how she felt about it; yet beneath her smiling words there lurked a little fear of the master. Biran was aware of it, even as he was aware of a feeling of guilt in himself. He realized she was asking him to laugh with her at the absurd pretensions of Zelinski upon her future, and so to lay that single ghost from the past. He said tentatively, "Do you know what Zelinski once said to me about you?"

"I know some of the dreadful things he used to say to me!"

"He said to me that he did not know if you were a genius, or just a woman bent upon ruining her life."

Elsa laughed. "That's just how clever the poor old dear is. Now *you* could tell him that I never even dreamed of being a genius, but that I am a very happy woman."

Biran smiled in spite of himself. "Still, I'm afraid there is no doubt about the fact of your talent. If you insist upon being happy as well—"

Elsa took the words from his mouth with a little *moue* of her own smiling lips. "Very well, then I *am* a little greedy." And this time Biran laughed outright. But Elsa was unexpectedly serious. "Each in itself is a life vocation, Theo. And I deliberately choose to be happy."

It was not exactly the moment for serious discussion, with Elsa nestling in her lover's arms; and Biran did not answer her at once. For genius is more of a tyrant in a person's life than the person is aware, until he tries compromising with it. He said slowly, "I think Zelinski is right when he says that the first head genius demands is that of happiness. You see, it cannot brook a divided allegiance. And the happy person has other altar fires to tend."

Elsa merely smiled. "It is going to be a very beautiful statue, isn't it, Theo? but you aren't exactly—unhappy—are you, dear?"

Women's logics. . . . How could he say to her that there was, just then, no room in his life for happiness or unhappiness? Instead he kissed her; he had never yet known a woman who did not instinctively think in personalities; for the matter of that, he was certainly not unhappy; but then, the artist and the man in him had long since come to terms on the single condition that the artist was always to have the lion's share of the feast. "It is not so simple as you would have it, Elsa. If you fight against it, say you won't be bullied, that you will live your life in your own way, a great black cap settles down over you, and you are neither

fish, flesh nor good red herring." He was smiling. "Genius is like whooping-cough—it will out."

Elsa did not pursue the subject. Slipping her fingers into his pocket she drew out his cigarette case. Certainly, at that moment, no one would have suspected the smiling, lissome girl of possessing any extraordinary power besides that of her youth and femininity. And Biran would have been the last man to wish it. Perhaps even now he wished it might have been otherwise. He looked at her hands playing with a tassel, at the bright aureole of her hair; and whatever he might wish or not wish, he knew the magic power in the slender girl hands, the power of achievement waiting in her heart of a woman. God! on what a fleeting chance depended the great things of this world. A day later, or a day sooner, and he might never so much as have known of the girl's existence. In that event, her charm, her genius, must certainly have been lost to the world.

Demurely, smiling a little, Elsa looked back at him from among the silk cushions where she now sat coiled into a corner of the divan. Then Biran shook himself together, inwardly not a little ashamed; for his thought had been, What a pity to waste such a *woman*. . . .

Elsa, twirling the tassel around and around her finger, would have disposed of the question of her genius as lightly as she twirled the tassel. Smiling she said, "You did not love me because I could fiddle, did you?" But her glance was a little wary. "I suppose, after all, I ought to be grateful to the fiddling, if that is why you first noticed me."

"Presently the world is going to be grateful to me, too."

The tassel came slowly to rest in Elsa's hands. She

had once hidden the violin so it would not obtrude itself upon her lover's notice; so now she was sorry she had spoken of Zelinski. "I—I don't quite see—what the world has to do with it, Theo."

The sculptor lighted another cigarette. "Just this, child. That we cannot chuck responsibility out of the window, even if it irks us." Elsa's eyes never wavered from his face, and Biran was inclined to smile, it seemed so absurd to be talking to that lovely child curled up among the silk cushions, as though she were a grown and responsible person. "It's a duty imposed upon us, and our talent, whatever it may be, is the means put into our hands to fulfil that duty. It does not greatly matter whether you are a musician or a sculptor or a gardener or a maker of clay pots. The only thing that matters is that the world needs and is waiting for that which has been intrusted to each one of us in our turn to bring to it. We must all give what we can, and in return take what we can. I do not know why it should be so, but humanity in general is a dumb lot. That is why, if one has the gift of articulate expression and keeps silent, it is as if one failed to deliver a message intrusted to one to deliver. What we call the arts are merely different modes of expression, just as one says the same thing in a dozen foreign languages, and in the end what they have all said in their different ways is what is in the common heart and lives of all mankind. But somebody has to give it voice, so the arts have come to be a universal language, that every one understands, even if they cannot speak it."

All the time the thought ran through his mind that it was too much like nipping the promising buds of delicious fruits in his own orchard, to point out to Elsa

the duties and responsibilities she owed away from him. It was too much to ask a man—her cherry-red lips were slightly parted—yet was she, in fact, listening to the rounded periods of his discourse? “If you or I withhold the little bit that is given into our care and possession, the whole can never be completed, any more than the individual can possess his life until he has discovered his particular talent. For in reality no one lives until he has discovered his reason for living. The secret of each life lies in its talent. Each must discover it for himself; but it is the gift of life to each and every one of us. And if we do not know our talent, we do not live.”

Elsa, listening seriously, nodded her head. “I know. Until I discovered *my* talent, I had not the smallest notion what all this business of living was about. It was like holding a book upside down, and turning the pages when everybody else did, without ever knowing that anything was written there to read.” She was sitting up straight among the cushions now. “And my talent that I have discovered for myself is just—loving you, Theo.”

It was a rare thing for Elsa to speak of love to her lover. In a thousand ways she showed her love for him, with her hands, her eyes, her voice. Inevitably, the physical element was strong in their love; in every love-relation between man and woman there is a certain return to the primitive emotions, held in leash, perhaps, but none the less powerful and exacting. There are moments of swift passion and revealment, when the soul of the man and the woman confront each other, naked and unashamed. Then a glance, a silence, and acute self-consciousness draws the veil of sex between, and to

the last drop of blood in his veins each is keenly responsive to the physical presence of the other. In the droop of an eyelash, Elsa recalled her lover to certain realities that he had, for the moment, forgotten. Despite its wanton irrelevance, Biran's mood had been austere; the artist reaffirming his faith, he knew no half-gods. Love and genius were supreme each in its own right, and must eternally stand guard each before its own sanctuary. Over Elsa's head Biran's glance had been wont to seek the door of his work room; yet need he resist the challenge of her laughing mouth? There was no thought of tempting him, in the girl's heart or mind; while her eyes smiled at him.

Holding her away from him, Biran repudiated temptation with a mock seriousness. "I dare not be so selfish. I rob the world of its just due and right, if I allow you to sit at my feet in worshipful silence. By your own confession, you have now also the gift of love to inspire your talent of music! You should not be so ungenerous as to keep it all for yourself!"

Elsa said softly, "No. I give it all to you."

Biran no longer resisted the challenge of her smile. After all, he had not spoken with any motive to convince or coerce her. He knew full well how it was with Elsa. He might quite as well have treated her to an eloquent discourse upon the inexhaustible subject of her eyelashes. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

SUMMER heat seized upon the city, and still Biran worked with a quiet, driving animation that took no account of time or fatigue. Every hour spent away from the work room was an hour lost. His mind was never quite free from the thought of his work; always in anticipation, his hands were modelling the clay, correcting here, shaping there. He fell into long silences, when he seemed scarcely aware of Elsa's presence in the room, and often, when he looked at her, she would become still and quiet, well knowing his critical, impersonal look of the artist. Yet there were days when he abruptly left the work room and went to join her in the studio; but far more often the long hours passed without his remembering if Elsa was in the next room or not. For to Biran, reduced to its living basis, life meant work, and such pleasure as one needed for refreshment; rare and precious interludes when life would be replenished at its sources; and, hand and heart, one would return with new ardour to the joyous task. He would always love Elsa. She had given him such peace and content as he had never known before in his changeful life. She symbolized to him all that was good and lovely in life. She had purged his heart and mind of much that had hurt and hindered him. In the life they had lived together, nothing lingered to tarnish the image in his soul. Yet he had loved her as a man loves a woman who rouses his passion and thrills his senses. He had kissed her lips passionately, tenderly. He was

still her lover; he still loved her; but it seemed he had less and less need of love. He was like a man who has slept and eaten and been refreshed, and come eager to his work, from dreams, to the reality of life.

Day by day, the clay figure grew in the image of Elsa. Biran worked feverishly, in a concentration of sureness and inspiration that informed every touch of his hands. As time passed, and he saw its reproduction under his hands, he thought less of the actual beauty of his conception as it had first compelled his imagination. Elsa's face was lovely to him always; only now he saw it more and more with an inner vision than with his physical eyes. He was neither blind nor indifferent to the lure of her eyes, her piquant mouth; but more than that, Elsa had impregnated his fancy, his creative faculty, with the spirit of her femininity, to the utmost of its promise. Because she had withheld no revelation of her woman's self from him, she had become to him not so much the woman he loved as the incarnation of all that a woman beloved signifies to mankind.

Then, without warning, he found himself one day standing before his work, with idle hands, incentive gone from him. He felt again the old world-weariness creeping upon him, numbing his spirit, staying his hand. A great physical fatigue overcame him. He had even spoiled some part of his work; and in a sudden flare of anger he swathed the clay figure in damp coverings, and opened the door into the studio. Standing on the threshold of the empty room he called to Elsa; until he remembered he had told her he would keep at work all afternoon. A wave of irritation swept over him. His wandering look stopped on the mirror, and he appeared to himself suddenly old, dingy. Then he found his hat,

and descended into the street. The glare from the pavement hurt his eyes; and the thought of the quiet uneventful days at the cottage with Elsa was like a soothing hand shutting out the hard light from tired eyes. He had rested well at the cottage. . . .

He stopped in the street, trying to remember how he had parted from Elsa that morning. And he could think only of a certain baffling line of the shoulder that had defied all his efforts to get it right. Then he remembered he had not even looked around when she said good-bye and had gone quietly out of the room. She had been right when she said it was a long way from the studio to Mrs. Hester's. It had been—how many days had passed since he had been to Elsa?

Then at last here was the street, and the house. Already he felt his spirits reviving. He knew Elsa would not harbour resentment against him. She would understand, and be kind and gentle. They would have the afternoon and the evening together, and the peace of the cottage would return upon him. His weariness fell from him. He wondered what Elsa would be doing, what her first word to him would be; he would go in very quietly and surprise her. But at her door the sound of music, of some one playing the violin, arrested his steps with something of a shock. Somehow, of all things, he had not expected to find Elsa playing her violin. Then he opened the door and went in.

The cool, darkened room was very quiet, very remote from the noise and glare of the streets. Biran's eyes rested with content upon the familiar bibelots that had been in the music room at the cottage; he recognized here and there little things he had given Elsa; a silver vase on the table, some books he had had bound for her;

and she herself was wearing a dress he particularly liked. Then she came forward to meet him. The violin had been hastily put aside at the first sound of his entrance; but he told her he had been listening outside her door. He had not heard her play since the night of the concert, he reminded her; and when presently he asked her to play to him, she rose at once and took up the violin, played again the music his coming had interrupted. And watching her while she played swift compunction seized upon Biran. He had not spared a thought to Elsa in all the heat of the summer; had not noticed her pallor, or that some of the spontaneous joy had gone out of her face. He sat up suddenly. But Elsa smiled at him over the violin. She was playing on muted strings a tender, murmuring melody; and her eyes looking at him were a little wistful, but very gentle and kind. Then the music hushed into silence, and she stood before him, quiet, grave and docile.

He did not speak at once. The violin held against her breast, Elsa had unconsciously fallen into her pose for the statue, and in a flash Biran had seen what was wrong with the line of the shoulder that had baffled him; a slight accentuation of the curve, and it would be quite right. Half an hour's work would suffice . . . and he laughed aloud, in sheer relief, and reached up a hand to Elsa. Now that he knew what was wrong he could correct the false modelling almost with a touch. And he drew Elsa down so he could kiss her lips; he had all but forgotten how well she played; something sang and wept in the music; and he smiled up at her; but Elsa saw he had not understood that she was making amends for that day at the cottage when she had refused to play to him, would not play, because she was quite

happy. So she said, "I will play to you whenever you like." And Biran kissed her hand that he still held in his. "Soon you will play to me again." But now he must not delay too long, or the precious knowledge in his fingers might escape him. Once he had corrected the false line of the shoulder, all would be well.

More and more aware of a growing vitality, of compelling energy, gradually taking the place of the depression and fatigue that had driven him forth from his work room, he had risen and was saying good-bye to Elsa.

"Theo, I met Herr Zelinski on the street the other day."

Zelinski. . . . Biran's inattention was suddenly arrested. He stopped, facing Elsa, waiting for her to speak again. For the instant thought in his mind had been that he could not spare her; then he smiled, more at himself, than at Elsa who would not fail him.

"He wants me to come to him for lessons. I wanted to speak to you about it; you said once you did not want me to forget how to play; but you are always so busy at the studio. Herr Zelinski thinks I have improved—a great deal, he says, Theo. I have been practicing, a little, when you did not need me at the studio."

Already a little ashamed of his sudden fear, and reassured that it had been groundless, Biran regarded the girl with mock-serious eyes. The amazing thing about Elsa was her docility. "The lure of the footlights, eh? By all means go to Zelinski." At the same time he looked around for his hat. He would return for her presently, when he had made sure of that elusive curve, and they would still have the evening together. "I knew long before it dawned on Zelinski that you could

bring the world to your feet." His smiling glance came back to Elsa. "Why, child!" Her wide eyes looked back at him with the mute dismay of some small wild creature stricken to the heart. "Elsa—" He went quickly to her side, protected her in his arms. "What is it, Elsa?"

"Theo—you didn't think—you don't think—I want to do *that*—when you talk about—footlights, Theo?"

Partly amused by her sudden distress, now that it was explained, scarcely pleased at this inconvenient issue, he soothed her, yet not quite at ease with himself. "Anyhow, not just yet, dear." And making compromise with his conscience he added, "You will want to yourself, when the time comes." For it would be time enough when the statue was finished—very soon now—for Elsa to win her laurels. But Elsa only shook her head against his shoulder, and burrowing deeper into his arms.

Biran did not return to the studio, after all. Instead, he and Elsa dined together, and later went to walk under the open sky, while the night life of the streets flowed past them, isolating them in their companionable solitude. They had often walked so when Elsa first came to New York, often in strange and unlovely places, while her frightened eyes looked straight before her, refusing to see, and she herself remained silent and shrinking. Perhaps Biran had wanted to test the calibre of her spirit; but he knew now he had confounded certain values. He had deliberately exposed her innocence to the ugly knowledge of the streets that life might teach her one of its harsh lessons; and then loved her for an inviolability of which even his lawless love had not despoiled her. Tonight his hand

closed over hers with a sudden protesting protectiveness. Much of the glitter and life was gone from the summer streets, and the passing crowds moved in a desultory, unanimated fashion, as if compelled by some outward compulsion rather than by an inner incentive of pleasure. Elsa alone seemed untouched by the heat or weariness. Her languor had quite passed; serene and friendly, she looked back at the passing people; and when a woman of the streets flaunted roughly against her, and Biran with instinctive annoyance sought to shield her from the meaning eyes, Elsa looked after the woman without distaste or fear in her eyes. "She doesn't like being that kind of woman, Theo, that's why she's so brazen about it, to make everybody think she doesn't care." None the less, her lover's swift instinct to protect her, his stern face forbidding the curious glances that she scarcely noticed, deepened the look in her eyes; she loved his strong, protecting arm, and the masterful strength of his shoulders interposed between herself and the world; and her hand yielded more completely into his. Presently, turning aside into a quieter street, Biran's rigidity relaxed. "Ugh. I hate a mob." He shook his shoulders as if to rid himself of any lingering contact with it. Elsa laughed. "Of all persons under the sun, Theo, you and the mob should not be calling each other names! What of all the times I've heard you say we were all brothers under the skin."

Biran growled. "Thank heaven for the difference in skins, then."

"Shame, Theo!" She was very severe with him. "I didn't understand at first, when I first heard you say it, but I know now that you were right. I used to think that because you had a great talent it made you differ-

ent from everybody else; until I saw it only made you understand more—but just about the same things all the rest of us were feeling and thinking about. So you ought to be more a brother than anybody else.”

“I’ve said a great many things in my life, beloved. I’ve even believed a great many things. Anyhow, a man isn’t always a genius, even in his own eyes. And I was thinking mostly of you, heart of my heart.”

But Elsa was thinking thoughts of her own. “Theo—do you remember—oh, ever so long ago—we saw such a dreadful woman on the street one night—and she frightened me, but you made me stand by while you spoke to her?” She did not wait for him to answer. Her hands only clung a little closer about his arm. “It’s strange, isn’t it—how just knowing one thing, just loving you, Theo, makes me know so many other things that have nothing to do with love at all? That’s why I didn’t mind about the woman just now. Because now I look at the people in the streets, and I understand, oh, so many things about them. I don’t feel strange to them any more. I am sure if I were in trouble, or any of them were unhappy, we should understand one another.”

Gradually their steps halted, and they stood close by an area fence, like any humble couple saying a last word before parting. A distant street lamp cast a dim light along the street, leaving the sidewalk in darkness. And many things, that the glaring light of day would have driven back into their secret hiding places, came forth under the shelter of the darkness. For the first time since she had cast in her lot with her lover’s, Elsa now spoke to him of her family, of her sister, who was more vividly real to her since their last brief intercourse than

she had ever been in all the years they had lived together under the same roof. Tonight Elsa spoke simply, quite frankly, to Biran, not disguising the slight wistfulness in her voice. She had not had a word from her family since she had written them the simple fact, that she was in the country, with Theodore Biran. She said now, smiling a little, "I'm sure each one of them separately would have written to me long ago, but as a family they simply had to decide against it. As a family, they couldn't, of course, encourage me by recognition—"

Was it a little secret shame that warmed her cheek in the darkness? In her heart of hearts, did she not more wholly understand the family verdict, than the tolerance of Biran's world? Yet she knew that, if not forgiveness, at least an explanation for her lay in the single fact of her lover's name. Because the man was Theodore Biran. . . .

Were she ever again to see her family, or any of the home-town people who in time must come to know of her relations with the famous sculptor, she realized that their attitude towards her would mingle curiosity with disapproval and interest. Were the secret known, the lustre of Biran's fame would always precede her, and be her fame, and if not quite justification for her, it would at least be a justification to others to feel an interest in her. "You see, they do not mean to be unkind. But of course I cannot expect them to understand. I shouldn't have understood. That's the way I should have felt, before I loved you, Theo. That's why Harriet is what she is. I'm sure she'd rather die than say it aloud, that she loved a man. You see, it's a kind of modesty with a lot of people, as if it were something it was not quite proper to mention. I know; because if

you had not come I would have been just like Harriet. All my life I should have been afraid to acknowledge the most wonderful thing in the world, and after a while, because I never should have known for myself, I would have believed that it was not a nice or proper sentiment,—to love,—except in poetry.”

She felt Biran’s hand strong and warm, inclosing her own.

“I’ve written a dozen letters to Harriet, and I’ve torn them all to tiny bits, because a letter couldn’t make her understand any more than it would have made me understand. I suppose that’s what Herr Zelinski means when he says he can feel it in my playing, and when I ask him what he feels, he says, ‘Ach, Fräulein, it is in the music.’” She was smiling again, her seriousness melting into gaiety at the slightest provocation. But for a moment she was serious again. “I don’t quite know how to say it to you, Big Bear dear, but I think I mean most of all, that you needn’t mind—anything—for me, because one can’t be afraid of things one understands. And even now that I am not going to be famous or talented or anything, I really can’t help just naturally feeling a lot of things; and if one feels enough, it’s a kind of understanding, isn’t it? Anyhow, just loving you has made me know bigger and more things than I’d ever have learned from the greatest masters in the world, if you had been cruel and sent me away—to Munich!”

But Biran held her away from him for a moment. “If I had not come, it would have had to be some one else that you loved, before you became a great artist, great masters or no.”

Just as they had stopped by the area gate, they now

moved away from it, continued on their way down the street. Biran could not quite see Elsa's face, but her voice had told him much. Now she caught her breath sharply. "If you had not come—" They were approaching the street lamp, and the light fell full upon her face. She was smiling at him, with strangely serious eyes. "But you did come." The smile rippled into a little laugh. "What funny music I must have made—! like a dumb man trying to speak, and worst of all, not having anything to say."

Biran crushed her hand in his, suddenly, savagely. Now that she had something to say, would she be content to say it to him alone? Some primitive instinct moved him suddenly to want to hurt her, to assert his dominance over her. She was so wholly—his, this girl who must pass from him to other loves, other kisses. . . .

He felt her wince slightly, then instantly forgive him, and he bent his head and kissed her, careless of the public street. They were alone in the world; the woman in her loved her master; who would know or care if he used his right and his strength to take what was his own? The girl asked nothing more from him, or of life, than her right to love and be loved. He would only be keeping what was his own, if he kept Elsa and her love for himself.

The smile had stilled in Elsa's eyes, on her lips. Something in her lover's emotion had communicated itself to her, and she had responded to his passion with quick, controlling comprehension; but she had not understood Biran's sudden change of mood. There had been that in the swift, passionate kiss that had never been in his kiss before. For an instant she had had the rapt, dizzying sensation of standing on the edge of a

precipice; then a strong arm had withdrawn her. At the same moment she felt Biran's hold on her hand relax, and he seemed suddenly to have changed his mind. But before he quite released her he kissed her again, abruptly, even roughly, on her lips that would some day be free to the love of the world . . . if he were to keep his promise, and give a great artist to the world.

The modelling of the shoulder proved unexpectedly difficult. Biran had let the moment pass when he could have made it right with a touch; but he had seen what was wrong, and if he could just put his mind on it . . . but the morning was almost gone, and still the correct line eluded him. So when his man brought word that Herr Zelinski was waiting to see him, he went at once to the studio and greeted him with mingled relief and annoyance. He liked the master; besides, there was no use ramming your head against the impenetrable wall of a lost moment. Zelinski came to the subject of his call immediately. In a word, he had come to demand of Biran his intentions regarding the Fräulein Elsa. He had no thought, nor a care, that his demand might be presumptuous. He thought only of the Fräulein and her music. He complained that Elsa gave no time at all to it, that she played or not, merely as an idle mood moved her, that apparently she had no interest in her playing, that she declined any discussion of the future, smiled aside any allusion to a career for herself. It was not right, it was madness, it was various other graphic things, that the girl should thus be playing fast and loose with her god-given gift. Time was flying; it would soon be a year that she had thrown

away—then Zelinski as suddenly halted his tumbling words, and looked at Biran. No. The year had not been wasted. He had to admit that. Elsa's playing had not suffered. None the less, the time had come when she must begin work seriously. In short, she must fulfil their original plan for her, and go away, to Munich, as they had decided she was to go, to the Herr Professor there, to whom he, Zelinski, had already written about the Fräulein Elsa.

Biran, listening silently, forgot to smoke his cigarette, watched it burn in his fingers, and carefully extinguished it in an ash tray, as Zelinski came to the end of his imperative appeal. Then he looked up. "And yet she is more—a woman—now, than in the days when you thought a woman's talent was a barren gift."

For the moment, it held the little man silent; as if it was a question of women—! then the vials of his scorn emptied upon Biran's head. With the wonderful thing there before their very eyes, calmly to ask, Is it so? And when Zelinski had exhausted himself, not his wrath, Biran gave him his answer, which meant all or nothing. "Miss Colt has absolute liberty to do as she thinks best, in this as in all things. I have told her I shall be glad if she resumes lessons with you. I cannot say more than that, to you."

Zelinski would have to accept his answer for what it was worth to him. And, mollified yet baffled, uncertain whether he had won or lost the day, the master presently left Biran to his own reflections. Wilkes, finding him thus at leisure, took advantage of the moment to serve luncheon, and Biran regarded it morosely, resenting the solitary place prepared at the table, rendered

more conspicuously solitary by the feeling that there was not a soul in the universe whom he would have chosen to sit across the table from him. As for Elsa, she was the last person in the world he wanted to see at that moment. He scarcely touched the food Wilkes solicitously set before him; and in a quarter of an hour returned to his work room.

By a sheer effort of will he perfected the line of the shoulder before he again quitted the room. At last admitting his exhaustion, he sought to recuperate his strength and vitality from the abundant life of the streets, as he had long ago learned to do; replenishing vital forces expended in the work of the day. Moreover, the issues engendered by Zelinski's visit could not be dismissed as had been Zelinski himself. But the truth of the matter was he could not spare Elsa, could not risk any change in her, any foreign mood, that might be reflected in his work. And when had not his work been first with him?

Gradually, the life of the streets revitalized him; and with returning interest he gave consideration to the immediate moment. Remembering his fragmentary luncheon, he decided to dine at his club, after which the evening would take care of itself. He had been a hermit long enough. Then, as he stood waiting for a taxi, his mood again altered; and he gave the driver the number of Elsa's lodgings. She opened the door to him with her arms full of muslins and laces, and the white softness of the mass of filmy stuff gathered into her arms made her look wholly irresponsible and adorably feminine, and deliciously young; while on all the chairs and tables in the sitting room were other masses of white and delicate things, that Elsa explained she

had been sorting to put away for the winter. It was such a pretty scene of domesticity as Biran had been accustomed to seeing at the cottage. Elsa herself was as full of pretty preoccupations as she went on with her sorting and considerations, as a bird fluttering about its nest. Then, suddenly, she became aware of his look, weary and intent, bent upon her. In a second she was all contrition. But Biran did not want tea. He could not have said what he wanted, but he knew he did not want tea. Contrite, eager, Elsa waited only to be told what was his will and pleasure. Perhaps he wanted her to play to him? While Biran, silent and slightly glowering, knew he did not want her to play to him; but if he refused tea, and did not want her to play to him . . .

Then he asked her to play. She obeyed at once. And Biran felt growing within himself a mad desire to snatch the violin from her, to demolish it with the strength of his hands. It would have been to him a great and inexpressible relief to break the thing to pieces against his knee. He had done his share of work in the world. For the best part of his life he had given himself to his work. In a few years more now, even the memories of youth would dim. Already he had premonitions of abiding weariness, of the growing lethargy of the senses, the indifference of life that comes with satiety of living. Always he had had to be on his way again, to go farther than he had come, to discover new paths, without ever a thought to spare for the time of weariness that must overtake him. His strength was not yet spent, but he was thinking that at the end he would still not have come to a place of rest. With a sudden welling of bitterness in his heart, he admitted that today he had

been even physically too tired for the conviviality of the club.

And Elsa. What of Elsa?

She had said to him once that her violin was mute because she loved him, because she was happy. And why not? To be happy was as great a gift as to play the violin.

What if Elsa never played again? Deliberately, he stopped thinking, gave himself up to the music weaving its spell about him. They would go away together, and let life have its way with them; and if the world lost Elsa's beautiful music, it would perhaps gain infinitely more, in Elsa's child. . . .

He rose abruptly. Elsa was playing the last bars of the music. In another moment she would look up; what would she see in his eyes? But before the last note quite died on the strings, the thought of his work waiting for him drifted like a cold mist between them; he must finish his work before all else; in another month or two he would be free again; and all the Zelinskis in the universe could not alter the design of destiny. What did he and Elsa care for Zelinski and the world? A few weeks more, and it would cease to exist for them. And tonight, now, they would go out and let the gay wearisome world amuse them.

Elsa was to put on her most beautiful frock. . . .

CHAPTER XX

THE day came at last when, looking at the visible results of all the months of his labour, Biran saw it justified to its last weary moment. The statue of the Woman and her Child, was all but finished. A few days more, and it would be quite done.

With no thought of the end, he had been working late into the afternoon, and pausing for a moment to take critical note of the day's work, he suddenly realized that his task was accomplished, that the spirit of life had passed into the clay image of his inspiration. It had not been there yesterday, nor even that very morning, but as he stood looking at the strong, serene face of the Woman, into the tenderly smiling eyes harbouring the love that meant life, he knew he had not conceived, nor wrought, in vain. The marble must be of flawless purity; and no hand but his own would touch it. He would himself do even the hard, preparatory work. And one day the world would be bidden to behold the wonder and mystery of its own life made to live in the sculptured marble, fashioned in the image of a young and dauntless woman who dares to pass the very threshold of life itself to receive its gift of a little child into her mother-arms.

His spirit was exalted, and infinitely humble, before this ultimate success that had come to him. In so far as a man can, he had realized his conception. Almost reverently, he protected the figure in its damp wrappings. Then in the same high mood of exaltation he left

the studio and went out into the open. It was the hour when all the world was hurrying homeward; and making his way with difficulty along the street, pressed upon all sides by the uncompromising facts of life in the actual living, Biran's thoughts gradually shaped towards the material issues of his own life. The first exaltation passed, the first purely spiritual joy of his accomplishment insensibly took the more concrete form of anticipation, of a tangible reward for this labour of his heart and hands that he gave to the world. The applause of the multitude had no power to move him; but he treasured, and found his supreme reward, in his power to move the multitude. High and low alike would feel their hearts touched, their life quickened, while they looked upon the sculptured figure; for he had conceived worthily and wrought well.

In the gathering dusk, his heart turned to Elsa, the woman he loved, and whose love-inspired eyes had quickened his vision, had been his inspiration. Elsa . . . but even as he hastened his steps he was conscious there was no response, no sudden warmth, in his heart. Instinctively, in his weariness and triumph his thoughts had flown to Elsa; and in the same instant, with the cruel unexpectedness of a knife-thrust out of the darkness, he knew that he no longer loved Elsa as he had loved her. He met it as he would a physical blow, with a leonine lift of his head; but the faint stir in his heart mocked him with its impotence. It seemed only the dregs of spent passion remained in his heart. He could have laughed, even while the waves of a yearning loneliness threatened to engulf him.

A sense of loss and passionate regret coiled about him. What had he gained for all he had lost? A little

fame, applause; while all that a man holds dearest and best in life, had escaped him. And this time he did laugh, harshly, bitterly, at the persistent, intruding thought of Elton,—Elton living his satisfied life in an obscure circle, safe in his possession of the homely realities of life. . . .

He had despised his old friend who had known no more of the love of a woman than need be for the consummation of a thrifty marriage; but it seemed that perhaps, after all, Elton had come nearer to the real meaning of life than he had, with all his loves. What was there for him at the end of the road? He felt suddenly old, world-weary, with a nostalgia for unknown things, for unknown havens of peace and fulfilment. The girl to whose love he had no right, had been the renewal of his youth. But she had come too late. She had taught him all that the love of a woman can mean to a man. She had given him all a woman can give a man; her love had been his delight and inspiration; and for all this he had only the barren love of a man who had never really loved, to give her in return. With a slow, hot anger, he thought of all the other men in the world who loved with a lesser love than his feeling for this girl, and yet had all he was denied. But being what he was he would go mad with their sanity. Half-ironically, half-tenderly, he recalled his hesitations, his uncertainties, his motives and impulses. He had not loved Elsa that first night of all because she had roused by her music, a dull audience to enthusiasm. But he had loved her. . . .

Without any sense of direction, he continued making his way slowly along the crowded street, allowing himself to be drawn this way and that, on the surge of the

hurrying crowds. His will was like a boat with a dragging anchor; once and again something arrested his progress; then the tide swept him on. He found himself suddenly bereft of the very reason and meaning of life. Locked away in his work room, the all but completed statue that had absorbed him body and soul, loomed before him as an intolerable task. Had it not robbed him, like a thief in the night?

He was like a man who opens his treasure chest to find the treasure gone. For he had loved Elsa, and his love had been converted into the perfect, inanimate beauty of a sculptured figure; all that the girl had been to him he had in his turn modelled into the face and figure of a clay image. . . .

But he would not submit so tamely. He was master, he would be master, in his own house of life. He would not give up what the least worthy of men took as his right. Of all the happiness he had known, as Elsa's lover he had been most happy. Did not the very sculptured figure he had made in her image proclaim to the world that the secret of life was love, the love of man and woman, of a man and a woman for their child? Why should he of all men be denied what the world received as its due? He had denied Elsa to himself for the sake of her genius, and had been robbed of his love for her. Yet Elsa herself asked nothing more from life than to love him and be loved by him. Why in heaven's name should he refuse her, deny himself—that she might spend herself in weariness and toil to fill some idle hours for gaping strangers? She was content and happy. She cared nothing for fame and fortune. She had said it herself that her violin was mute because she was happy. They were happy together. She wanted no

other happiness. She had a woman's instinctive need to love and be loved.

But passion kindled in him only to flare and die again.

Beyond all dispute, he knew he no longer loved Elsa with the love that gave him supreme right. And still he repudiated what he could not deny. He would not admit that he didn't love Elsa; perhaps not with the first impetuous ardour that had made him her lover; perhaps he did not love her with the gentler, deeper love that had kept him her devoted companion for all the months they had been together at the cottage; it might well be that in these later months of his incessant occupation he had even grown a little away from her; but it could not be that he no longer loved her. He all but laughed aloud in his sudden relief. Why, the thing locked away in his work room was only so much clay that a blow of his hand would destroy into nothingness; while Elsa, Elsa was a living, beautiful woman who loved him and whom he loved. . . .

He quickened his steps, took rapid account of where he had wandered, and came suddenly eye to eye with a man who had already recognized him. He swallowed an oath; but it was too late to turn away. So he stood waiting while Hardesty made his way to him. The young man called his greeting before he reached Biran's side. "Well met! What are you doing here in the dog days?" Mechanically, Biran submitted to a friendly hand-clasp, felt a familiar clutch at his elbow. To his intense astonishment, he knew he was glad to be thus detained. To the other's repeated question, he answered, "Working," and there came again into his mind the thought that his work was almost done; and that with

its completion his life must take on new forms, his hands find other work to do.

Hardesty's hand still at Biran's elbow, the two men walked on. In fragmentary sentences, sometimes spoken around an intervening shoulder, sometimes confidentially into Biran's ear, the younger man proceeded to inform him of the gossip of the day of which the artist showed himself woefully ignorant. The association of ideas was inevitable; and equally inevitable that Hardesty in his turn should ask a question, should, with nonchalance, inquire about Elsa. They had stopped for a moment at the intersection of two streets, and Hardesty had taken his hand from Biran's elbow. "By the way, old man, what became of that girl who had her public by the ears and then disappeared over night?" He laughed. "That was one time I counted my chicks before they were hatched. The young woman would have been a success, you know." Hardesty, as it happened, was the energetic young impresario who took chances with budding genius, and who had arranged Elsa's first and only concert. It was not therefore curiosity alone that prompted his daring; he was interested in this bit of good business that had escaped him. He looked at Biran inquiringly; the girl must have had talents other than her talent for music, to interest a man like Biran. "I wouldn't mind taking another chance with her," he added tentatively.

Biran's profile remained inscrutable. "The young lady's name is Miss Colt, if you happen to have forgotten it," he casually contributed.

Unabashed, Hardesty merely smiled. He had not forgotten the name; but knowing so little he had thought it best to assume everything. Before pursuing the sub-

ject any further, he suggested that he and Biran dine together, to celebrate the artist's return to the haunts of his fellows; for Biran was, after all, a man like the rest of them, once he got away from his obsession of work; and might, in a confiding mood, reveal the whereabouts of Miss Colt. And again to his unbounded surprise, Biran heard himself accepting the other man's suggestion, hard upon his own resolve to part from him at the next corner. He had no great intimacy with Hardesty, but there was something in himself that he wanted to keep at bay. He knew the young man would speak of Elsa again; and while he resented her name on Hardesty's lips, he expected him to speak of her again.

But there was method in Hardesty's curiosity. And he was, first, last and always, the rising young impresario who never made mistakes in picking successes. And that girl of Biran's had been most promising. It wasn't likely, moreover, that she had lost ground. For if he knew anything about women, she couldn't do better than be friends with a man like Biran. After all, it wasn't technique that made people sit up and take notice.

Biran, watching the light glance through his glass of port, listened, while Hardesty evolved his great plan for the future of the pretty little girl, as he still called Elsa. "She's more of a woman, bless her heart, than one expects of the talented feminines," he said. "Most of the poor homely dears never have the ghost of an opportunity to run up against anything that helps shape raw material into something worth while. But with a real talent like hers and personal charm thrown in for good measure, well, it's a combination that simply

can't help winning out, given half a chance." He knew he had Biran's attention, for all that the older man maintained his impersonal silence. Hardesty tapped lightly on the table with his knuckles. Then he made his point. "If she's already learned her ABC's so much the better. There's nothing like a love affair to set match to powder. I've seen it a dozen times; that the spluttering subsides into something worth while; a steady flame of achievement. Only, you've got to keep on feeding the fire once it's started; but it's equally true that the temperamental flame will consume just about everything that comes its way. Once get it kindled, and you can sit back and wait for the applause." He waxed more and more eloquent. It was not alone the wine; in the midst of his busy life, opportunity seldom offered to exchange conclusions with a kindred spirit; and he really had copious if somewhat diffuse ideas on this subject of artistic practicabilities and ideals.

Biran continued to sip his wine; but Hardesty could not long remain on the impersonal plane to which he had soared. His thoughts took concrete shape, and he descended swiftly to facts. "There's Noreen. *That's* a matter of history." He put down his glass, leaned across the table to Biran. "And she wasn't even pretty to start with. *That's* a matter of history, too. And look at her now. She's the most wonderful woman on the stage today. And why? Just because she knows what the playwright's talking about when he puts his people through their emotional paces. Love and hate and joy and despair aren't mere words to her. She knows what moves a woman to want to kiss her lover, then rend him tooth and nail, and that roses grow on thorny stems. *That's* why the box office is

always sold out weeks ahead for her. *You* know. And I miss my guess, which I don't do very often, if that young lady of yours doesn't graduate into the same class." He nodded meaningly. "And it's no small cheese to be a Noreen. A woman had better think twice before she throws away the chance.

"I'd put my money on her any day."

So, at last, it emerged, the obscured thought animating his conversation with Biran. If he did not immediately follow up his eloquent preamble with definite proposals having to do with contracts, it was simply policy on his part to wait for the other man to make the first move. After all, the girl was Biran's discovery; even Hardesty's eagerness could not quite ignore the fact. His plans for her involved on Biran's part, the giving up of something to the world that he might, quite conceivably, prefer to keep for himself. At the same time, the girl's talent was one in a hundred. Of course, it would be several years before she amounted to anything as a head-liner. But if Biran would put him into communication with Miss Colt, he would no doubt see his way to meeting any reasonable terms they might ask. He half expected the sculptor to send him about his business; when Biran did not interrupt him with an abrupt refusal, his misgivings vanished. He did not ask for an immediate answer. The young lady herself would of course have to be consulted. And although Biran had signified not the slightest interest or approval in the proposal, he had listened. Hardesty, for his part, was ready to close the matter there and then.

Biran, still silent, slowly turned and turned the slender stem of his wine glass between his fingers.

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He found Elsa sitting by her window, the room dark, and oppressively still. He came so quietly, she did not hear him enter; and his glance went swiftly, directly, to her hands folded listlessly in her lap. By the light from a street lamp coming through the window, he could see her plainly; the lines of her face, of her figure, seemed suddenly alien, yet strangely familiar to him. Then he understood. As she sat there motionless by the window, Elsa had relapsed into the same state of bodily inertia that had lain so heavily upon the girl when he had first known her. He could not see her eyes, but their expression must have reflected the lassitude of her pose. Her violin was lying perilously upon a chair where she had put it aside; and she seemed to be waiting, while weariness crept upon her.

Waiting—the word had a sudden, sinister significance to Biran.

Tonight she had been waiting a little too long. She was tired, he could see it in the set lines of her face, in the droop of her shoulders. For what was she waiting?

He had left Hardesty to come to Elsa, telling himself that the time had come to redeem his promise. His love had nothing more to teach her, nothing more to give her. As for himself, of what use to rebel against the tyranny of the swathed figure of steel and clay when he knew he would return to it? Of what use to tantalize himself with thoughts that must never become realities in his life? Let that young fool Hardesty imagine that his words had prevailed to induce him, Biran, to throw away his happiness; let Elsa think what she must think, and so come to hate him.

After all, he had not promised to make Elsa a happy woman. But he had promised to put it into her power to become a great artist.

But as he went quickly up the stairs to her rooms, it was of Elsa he had been thinking, of Elsa with her warm lips and glad eyes and welcoming hands; while Hardesty and all the thoughts of the evening were far from him.

Then he entered the room and saw her waiting.

It came to him suddenly that he must have become gradually accustomed to this look of apathy, of inert patience, in Elsa; for the first time her passive, waiting look seemed to demand justification at his hands. She was waiting—for what? In the brief moment before Elsa felt his presence in the room, Biran's thoughts encompassed all the future. They might go on so year after year; Elsa waiting, listening for his footsteps; while he—would not the time come when it became an effort, a duty, to come to Elsa? Then she felt him near her; and like mist before the sun, languor and apathy fled from her eyes. She was in Biran's arms before he could prevent her, had he any wish to prevent her. She held her lips to him; and Biran kissed her; felt her warmth warming him; and kissed her again. . . . Zelinski, Hardesty, his own resolutions—all words, mere idle words that had less reality than the faint stir of Elsa's breath on his cheek. Only he and Elsa alone in the world. . . .

High in the black night sky, the stars shone serenely on. The warm breath of the sleeping city came in to them through the open windows; the ceaseless, subdued murmur of life in the distant streets was like the hum-

ming of a myriad bees. Then, faintly colourful, dawn crept out of the night.

Biran looked down at Elsa. Was she sleeping, happily smiling? trustful in his arms; and he knew his passion had cooled, was a wan, colourless thing of the dead past. Anger, and thwarted love, burned like a flame on his lips. Elsa stirred, smiling into his eyes. She could not know what had disturbed her; but there had been all the passionate protest of farewell in his kiss; she knew only that his arms held her close, as if he meant never to let her go.

The stars were still silver in the night sky. But the grey of dawn was just beyond the horizon. It would soon be tomorrow. And tomorrow he would redeem his promise; yet for a little while longer her heart would beat against his own.

The night was all but spent. One by one, the stars dimmed in the sky. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

BIRAN had been about to write a note when his man admitted Elsa. He was jaded and worn, and in that first moment when she came forward, he almost resented the marvellous freshness of the girl as she appeared unexpectedly before him.

"I won't bother—if you want to work." While her eyes said, surely he would not want to work. And if his strange silence held her at arm's length, she daringly read the look in his eyes. And her radiant smile, suddenly a little shy, laid bare her heart before him. What need had they of words? who shared a memory of silver stars gleaming in the sky.

Vexed and ill at ease, fearing to betray himself, conscious that the future lay within a single glance, Biran met her eyes with a look deliberately appraising, and spoke many words. "Do you know, you are that *rara avis*, a woman with an artistic talent and a talent for beauty, as well? Hardesty was talking about it yesterday. He was curious to know what had become of you."

Elsa remained motionless. That was a strange way for Theo to talk to her. And who was Hardesty? She said at last, slowly, "I am glad—to be pretty for you, Theo."

Biran did not answer. He had turned back to the desk, was occupying himself with selecting an envelope. He was ashamed, self-conscious; above all, he must not think of last night, of his own perfidy, of Elsa—Elsa

who was glad to be pretty for him! He must make her understand. Opportunity sat grinning at his elbow, whether he would or no. He turned, and looked at her, even smiling a little. "Oh, I agree with Hardesty, of course. Beauty, of truth or form, is an essential of success. Hardesty has not forgotten your success that night of the concert, you know." But that too was a dangerous memory. He continued speaking rapidly, "He offers to present you at another concert, to keep your public in mind of what they have in store for them, when you reappear as a full-fledged head-liner, say a year or two hence. And that's a great deal from a man of Hardesty's experience."

This was what he had meant to say to Elsa last night.

"Hardesty and Zelinski are right, you know. It is not as if you were just a pretty girl. I have kept you out of your kingdom long enough, as it is." He heard Elsa laugh softly; when a woman loves she cares so little for all the world! And even as he spoke Biran knew the inadequacy, the futility, of his words. The issue between them was not of art and artists. . . .

With a word of apology he turned back to his desk; presently, only the slight scratching of his pen was to be heard; while Elsa, from force of habit, wandered about the studio, in her little proprietary manner, giving an eye to this or that. Carefully she rearranged the perfectly arranged smoking equipment on the low stand. She loved the studio and every individual thing in it, with a warmth of affection that found expression in the lingering touch of her hand, in her habit of leaning her cheek in a passing caress against the high back of Biran's big chair.

Presently she spoke softly. "Theo—"

"Yes?"

"Let's go back to the cottage, Theo. We were so happy at the cottage."

The movement of Biran's pen over the paper stopped suddenly. He did not turn, nor did Elsa take the few steps that separated them.

"I will never again play before strange people, Theo. I couldn't—play in public places—now, Theo. It would be like giving my heart to every passing stranger. You would not ask me to do that.

"So if you are thinking of me, Theo, if Herr Zelinski has been troubling you about me—" She came to stand beside him. "Don't you know, that I wouldn't give up the tiniest little minute with you, for all the applause in the world? I only want to be happy. I am happy with you. I don't want to waste precious hours and days and years away from you. If I have a talent, it's just for loving you, dear.

"I want just one thing more.

"Do you know, Theo, there is one person in the world of whom I'm jealous." Her eyes smiled a little. "It's Wilkes. I want to do for you what Wilkes does. I want to put away your clothes, and see you eat things I have made with my own hands, and hold your coat for you when you are going out, and to meet you at the door when you come in," smiling gently she all but touched him with her eager hands. "I love you like that. *Now* don't you see that it is quite, quite impossible, for me to think of concerts and studying and going away—of all the useless, tiresome things an artist has to do? I'll study and work hard, if you want me to play, but only for you.

"Do you remember that night at 'Thais'—they said the singer wore her heart on her sleeve when she sang? They said—it was not quite decent—to do that, Theo. And I didn't understand then, but I know now, and I couldn't play before strange people. You mustn't ask me to. You mustn't ask me.

"You always said one has to play from the heart; it is not enough to play with the fingers. That is how I play now, Theo, just what is in my heart. So you see, I couldn't play to all those strange people." Her smile was a little daring now. "The only thing I have to say, dear, is that I love you."

Biran dipped his pen in the ink. He could feel Elsa coming nearer, a step at a time. He had to say something to stop her; he dared not turn and look at her. "That's only one of the things you had to learn, if you were ever to be more than a mere amateur." He opened one of the little drawers of the desk, peered thoughtfully into it, closed it again. "You would never have learned to be an artist, if you hadn't learned what it was—to be a woman. In five years from now you will thank me."

Elsa listened patiently, fighting the look in her eyes of one suddenly hurt. "You talk all the time about something that doesn't exist, Theo. If it was ever so that I might have become a great artist, well, I've chosen instead to be—just myself. So let's talk about you and me, Theo." She was at Biran's elbow now, half-smiling, half-wistful. "Isn't it enough that you made a beautiful statue, because you loved me? Perhaps, if we had not been at the cottage together you would never have had the same thoughts, you might never even have thought of the 'Mother and Child,' Theo, if one day I had not waited for you at the gate—

you said so yourself, Theo. So you see, loving me hasn't interfered with your work." She was deliberately, knowingly tempting him. Her hands did not actually touch him, but with every fibre of his being Biran felt them calling him to turn, to look at her.

"We'll be so happy, you'll just naturally have to have wonderful, beautiful feelings again, and by and by you will have another inspiration, and maybe that will be the greatest masterpiece of all."

But Biran knew what was in her eyes. What did love care for inspiration that put love aside; or inspiration for love, save to outwit it, master it, annihilate it as though it were an intruder. She was speaking with the guile of instinct, of age-old power of woman over man. It was not inspiration she offered her lover, but her lips. Slowly then he turned. He had never seen her look unveiled like that before. He looked into her eyes as one gazes fascinated, into the heart of a flame where molten metal is fused into shape. His fingers tightened on the pen. If he kissed her, he would but take her at her word, a woman who loved him, who chose love. Of course Elsa was right; Elsa, with her cherry-red lips and veiled eyes. What answer could he make to her, save with his arms holding her close? To gain time, he went on making phrases to himself. Elsa was right. If he made love pay all the price of his broken faith, would he not be justified? He had immortalized a passing moment of their love; enriched the world in beauty because one day Elsa had waited for him by the gate; if now he put his hand in hers what mystery might not be revealed to him? In that moment he would have exulted in his defeat, if the impulse to hold her against all the world proved stronger than himself.

He put down the pen, took it up again.

He could scarcely make the simple physical effort to put out his hand to Elsa. He had no more right to look into her eyes than he would have to enter a stranger's house.

"We were so happy at the cottage, Theo."

He refused to hear the murmured words. Slow anger burned in him, fed by his own irresolution. Other women as surely as Elsa bore within themselves the secret of the mystery that was in her eyes. Yet what other woman had the allure of Elsa? But he must not think of that. With a single motion he tore in half the note he had been writing. So—it was no use talking to her of art and a career and fame, if she refused to play because she was happy. The note he had just destroyed had been to Noreen; but he could write a dozen notes to the beautiful actress and Elsa would not give it a thought.

He came to his decision swiftly; a vague, half-formed purpose suddenly took definite shape in his mind. Perhaps Elsa's murmured words, "We were so happy at the cottage," tempted him beyond his strength; perhaps he knew that it could never be like that for them again. Deliberately, then, he wrote another note, addressed an envelope, while Elsa waited, waited for him to speak to her; her eyes following every movement of his hands. Then he returned the note paper to its place, put away the envelopes, closed the ink well. The letter was addressed to Mrs. Wingate. Elsa had read the name as Biran wrote it, but at the moment it meant nothing to her. He had so many acquaintances and affairs outside her knowledge. Then suddenly the name on the letter assumed a significance to her. "I did not

know Miss Wingate was in New York." The words spoke themselves mechanically. She was really not thinking of Miss Wingate, even yet.

Biran put the stamp box into its place on the tray. "She was not—until last week." There had been no premeditation in his choice of the other woman. Only the week before the Wingates, mother and daughter, had sent their cards to the studio, a reminder of their existence that Biran had ignored, forgotten, until their name flashed into his mind. Truth to tell, he knew himself to be a little desperate, clutching at straws. Yet he could scarcely have made a better choice, for his purpose, than this of Elsa's townswoman. But if Elsa waited for an explanation, she waited in vain. Biran touched the bell for Wilkes, who came at once, and went as noiselessly as he came, bearing the note with him for immediate delivery. Then at last Biran turned his back on the desk, and lighted a cigarette. He asked Elsa, "Do you happen to know what kind of flowers Miss Wingate likes?" And Elsa echoed, "What kind of flowers?" and retreated to the big chair where she had stopped when she first came into the studio.

"Yes. I'm asking them to dine, and I happen never to have spoken with Miss Wingate about flowers." One might have thought he had spoken often and interestingly with Miss Wingate. But Elsa was not thinking of the other girl. She was thinking that Biran had not kissed her, had not asked her to stay, seemed even waiting for her to go. Slowly, she picked up her coat from the chair, slowly drew on one sleeve, before Biran came to help her.

After Elsa had gone, Biran did not go to his work

room, and when later Wilkes returned with the information that Mrs. and Miss Wingate were out of town for the week-end, he drew a breath of relief. He tried to work then, but his restlessness increasing, he threw everything aside, and gave himself up to his thoughts. Brutally he put it to himself that he had the habit of Elsa. And for the first time since he had loved her, he felt a furtive shame. All the time Elsa had been with him that morning he had not allowed himself an emotion; but now again the armour was down; and he could not get the memory of all that had been, out of his heart and thoughts. By every rule of the game he should have spared Elsa this last treachery to her love . . . but the girl got into a man's blood; and he would have been less than man, more than human, to have put her from him.

Then, presently, stubbornly resisting the insidious thoughts that beset him, he told himself he was glad, at least that he saw the wisdom and necessity of it, that the affair with Elsa was ended, or as good as ended.

He dined at the club and dragged through a stupid evening. The next day a note informed Elsa that he too, had gone out of town for the week-end, to join the Wingates, which he actually did, to the great surprise and joy of those ladies. And having burned his bridges behind him, he paused to survey the situation. With grim humour, he admitted that Elsa had always possessed the power of inspiring him with ideas. If he was to make her believe that his affections were engaged elsewhere, no one else in the wide world would so well suit his plan as Miss Wingate, whose pink and white attractions were to him as Dead Sea Apples. It had not been necessary to exile himself with the Wingates; he

had done so perhaps to put distance between himself and temptation; as for Elsa, she could come to but one conclusion if she believed him interested in Miss Wingate. Despite the fact that she had come with him to the cottage, tradition was dyed-in-the-wool with Elsa, stronger, more potent, than any individual freedom of thought and action. He knew that for all the world save herself alone, she held tenaciously to the idea of marriage, as the only possible relation between man and woman. She could regard his supposed interest in Miss Wingate in no other light. His many clever phrases could never have convinced her against the essential fact, as it was to her, of marriage.

At this point, Biran smiled ironically, a little tenderly. Elsa would never outgrow some of her provincial valuations. It would appear to her quite understandable that a man might wish to marry a Miss Wingate. However, he saw to it that his intercourse with the Wingate ladies was of the briefest; it was what Elsa thought, not what he did, that was of import.

He let several days pass after his return to town before seeing Elsa. In pursuance of his idea, he went first to see Zelinski. The master was giving a lesson, and Biran had his choice of going away, or waiting in the anteroom. He chose to wait; and when presently there came to him the faint sound of a violin, he knew instinctively it was Elsa playing, and following the call of the music, he rose and sought the studio. He stopped in the open doorway, and looked across the long room, while Zelinski merely stared back at him. The whole house had fallen under a hush. There was only the sound of a violin, Elsa playing. . . .

Vital and alive, her slender figure dominated the big

room until all material things receded from her. It was as though the very spirit and soul of the girl had passed into her fingers, was being transformed into the music they evoked. She was playing tender, passionate music; and like a smouldering spark the passion waxed and grew. There was a note almost of bravado in the surging sounds, the sheer, unmasked reality of emotion, of passion, knowledge, that makes free the spirit. If Elsa could play like that. . . .

Love had been food and wine to her famished soul. She had walked hand in hand with life, and fled not from pale shadows. And Biran, listening, told himself that she might come to hate him, but whatever profit she would have of her life she would owe it to him. Far more than the mother who bore her, he had given her the gift of life, and made her eyes to see, and her heart to feel. But when at last she stopped playing, he did not advance into the room, instead watched from the threshold how Zelinski, the tears glistening in his emotional eyes, would have poured out his soul in an embrace; but Elsa gave him her hand, kind, a bit indulgently, and smiled as a much older person might smile at a child's uncontained joy. Then she turned to greet Biran. In the moment of his own confusion, he felt a swift admiration for her mastery over herself, and of him. She must be thinking that he had passed these days of his absence from her with another woman, as he had meant her to believe. If he feared, or sought, to see resentment in her eyes, there was no trace of it, nor in her voice, nor in the touch of her hand, which he held for a moment longer than there was warrant for it. Above all, there was no need for conversation with Zelinski. He had heard for himself

what he had come to ask the master; and he left the house with Elsa. Conscious of his own double dealing, whatever its motive, he knew he wanted Elsa to put herself in the wrong by demanding explanations, apologies, avowals. One scene would lead to another; she would inevitably jump to conclusions which she would expect him to deny; she was already in possession of the pregnant fact that he had left her to go to Miss Wingate. In the midst of his contempt for himself, he felt a growing irritation that Elsa did not help him, did not, by so much as a look, accuse him. She asked if he had had a pleasant visit; and it was presently borne in upon Biran that he was to be left with his deep-laid plans upon his hands. Obviously he had failed in his object of absenting himself. Brutal as had been his clumsy methods in seeking to rouse her jealousy, he would have to be more directly brutal yet. If she would not see it for herself, he would have to say to her, I am leaving you for another woman.

Immediately her door closed upon them, with swift movements Elsa cast aside her hat, drew off her long gloves, came smilingly back to Biran, with a little mischievous smile that bubbled into laughter, over the comedy of sedateness they had been playing in the street. "I knew all the time you were there, at Herr Zelinski's."

What was there for Biran to do but to kiss her?

"I heard your step. I am quite sure I could tell it among a thousand steps. But I didn't turn around."

"Why didn't you turn around?"

Elsa became suddenly severe. "I was angry with you for being rude to me the other morning."

"Was I rude to you?"

"You didn't kiss me."

No. She would not help him. If he could face her in a flare of anger, resentment for resentment; if she would herself drag another woman between them . . . but he would have to do it with cold-blooded premeditation, slowly and artfully,—or quickly and with open brutality,—but do it he must—must stand by and watch the iron of his perfidy enter into the girl's soul. He would have to tell her, standing so near he could touch her, that he no longer loved her, that he found interest and distraction away from her; that he meant to leave her. He had to wound her to the very depth of her soul that she might come to know there were depths of feeling beyond any she had ever fathomed in her happiness; he would have to see her gentle eyes take on the look of a hunted thing, as it comes to bay before its tormentor. He could only pray that at the last moment he would not turn coward, and to spare himself, sacrifice her.

Elsa, demure and severe, confronted him, her hands held behind her back, as if refusing them to him. Slowly, Biran was realizing certain words of Noreen's, who had said, from the fulness of her knowledge of all things, "You cannot make a woman jealous until she doubts her own power."

Elsa had no idea of power, of her power over him. She would have said quite simply, that they loved each other, she and her lover. He could hurt her, but he could not make her doubt him, or lose her faith in him. She would not help him. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

BUT fate, in the guise of Hardesty, was hard upon Biran's heels. It seemed to him that the young man haunted every street corner he turned, was always just coming out of every doorway he was about to enter. And if he did not speak to Biran about Elsa, the mere sight of his face, the first sound of his voice, seemed to summon Biran to keep his word—although he had never passed his word to any one. Beneath his silence the young impresario was tenacious; he meant to have his way; and Biran too, meant that he should have it.

Day after day, Biran did not enter his work room. It was almost as if he sought to retard the inevitable, by putting off the completion of his work. For with each completing touch of his hand upon the clay figure, he seemed to be approaching another end, another severance of ties. He made it known that he was keeping open house again; and the late afternoons often found Miss Noreen, who had returned to town for the winter season, at the studio; and in the actress' train, as of yore, came young VanSmythe; until gradually the old circle was reassembled. And if almost her first question had been of the girl Elsa, Miss Noreen quite as amiably acknowledged the introduction of Mrs. and Miss Wingate who, more and more often, were of the privileged number gathered around the tea table. Just as she used always to do, Miss Noreen poured tea, or deputed the gracious duty to Miss Wingate, whose alien pres-

ence among them the circle accepted without question, accustomed as they were to their host's catholic taste in femininity. So it was that when one day Elsa came to the studio expecting to find Biran alone, it was Miss Wingate who gave her welcome from her own place at the tea table. A silence fell upon her unannounced entrance; curious eyes turned to her as she stood undecided; but of all the persons in the room she saw only the Wingates. They had not yet met. If she was aware of Biran's continued intercourse with them, she had made no sign. Today, her one thought and anticipation had been to see Biran. Confronted by all her past and future envisioned in the aspect of the mother and daughter, the moment found her unprepared. And it was Miss Noreen who with her quiet understanding smile that asked nothing and yet seemed to know all, saved the field for Elsa; and sitting by the actress' side, the girl felt herself at least not quite abandoned before the eyes of the curious group. But even Miss Noreen's kindness could not spare her the nemesis of her violated traditions. In the brief space of Mrs. Wingate's "Ah—", with which that lady acknowledged the introduction, Elsa had felt herself again the obscure young girl of her native town, condescended-to by one of its great ladies. She might resent this invasion of the studio; but above all she was constrained, intimidated, by it. From the very beginning of things the name of Wingate had stood in her consciousness for all that was desirable and unobtainable. She might be soothed by Miss Noreen's kindness; but stronger than her personal gratitude to the beautiful actress was the overpowering and disconcerting sense of Mrs. Wingate's presence. Elsa had entered the studio as if it

were her own room. Her lover's name had been on her lips; she did not know if she had spoken it aloud; she only felt a swift wonder that his greeting had been so formal, as if he too had been surprised, to see her. But it was at Mrs. Wingate's slightly interrogative silence that fear crept into her heart. The lady had doubtless heard gossip and come to her own conclusions; moreover she no less than Elsa subscribed to the social traditions of their native town; but there was certainly no doubt of the prestige of the charming actress; and Miss Noreen's warm greeting of the girl from whom Mrs. Wingate had deliberately withheld recognition showed that lady she had somewhat erred. Presently, therefore, her look was tempered by a smile; she remembered that the girl had certain pretensions to talent; and for all that she was so mouse-like, and not so pretty as her own daughter—Mrs. Wingate's glance flew between the two girls—it appeared this young interloper could not be dismissed in a word. Miss Wingate, smiling faintly, and conscious of what she would have called a "French situation," for she too had heard gossip, likewise was covertly examining Elsa; and her eyes encountered her mother's, surprised disconcertion in the older woman's look. Maternal and worldly instinct had simultaneously roused. Suddenly anxious, not a little annoyed, it became necessary to determine the exact status of this upstart girl here in the studio, in the life of their host.

Mrs. Wingate smiled graciously upon Elsa, and made room for her on the divan. Obedient to her nod, Elsa came to her. "I hope we shall have the pleasure of hearing you play?" Mrs. Wingate did not actually use a lorgnette, and she still smiled; just so she might

have pressed home a pin through a butterfly to fasten it under her researching gaze.

"No. I do not play."

No. It was not the gracious lighting of the studio, the reluctant mother of Miss Wingate had to admit. It was there for all the world to see,—eyes, mouth, the piquant challenge of the slow smile. She no longer doubted the truth of the gossip; it only remained to be seen how difficult the girl would show herself. "But I understood you had come to New York to study to be a professional, with even a greater ambition, it was said?" She meant her smile to be encouraging; of course it was possible the girl might some day be somebody in the musical world; but obviously music was not, now, her chief preoccupation.

Elsa answered, "Yes."

Mrs. Wingate waited for further explanation. None came. Never too ready with mere words, Elsa could not take Mrs. Wingate into her confidence. But there was no need. That lady had not overlooked the lovely dress, the charming hat, the pendant sapphire on its slender chain. There was something watchful, insinuating, in the glance she bent upon Elsa. She meant to have an answer, if not in words, in a glance then, but she needs must know what this girl thought of her own situation. "Then—you have other plans, other intentions?" Without appearing to leave Elsa's face, her glance included Biran, at the moment talking with Miss Wingate. A slight colour came into Elsa's cheeks; she was not so unself-conscious, not so innocent of worldly knowledge, that she did not understand the insinuation, or fail to read the glance. But the little stilled joy in her heart wakened almost in spite of herself; the little

fearful joy that had been on her lips with Biran's name. . . . Then she saw Mrs. Wingate was looking at her, with a look that was not to be mistaken, with unkind eyes, as though she, Elsa, had been discovered doing something ugly and wrong.

Perhaps to any one else she would have raised candid, confessing eyes; instead, her glance turned to Biran, to the other girl, Miss Wingate, who was everything she, Elsa, was not.

Biran had scarcely spoken to her. He had brought tea to Miss Noreen, and a cup to Elsa, and had not approached her again. Her heart beat heavily, slowly. But she did not dare to look at him openly, scarcely dared to raise her eyes for fear all these strange persons would read her glance; above all, fearful now lest Biran look at her.

It was young VanSmythe who saw that she did not drink her tea, and who presently offered her cake instead of the bread and butter that remained untasted on her plate; and thus saved her from the inquisition of Mrs. Wingate's eyes. He deliberately added himself to the tête-à-tête. He had waited to see what Biran would do; but the sculptor had remained by the tea table. Entirely ignoring Mrs. Wingate, the young man's look isolated Elsa from the rest of the room. Leaning a little too familiarly to her, he offered Elsa his cigarette case. She had never smoked; but now she put out her hand and took a cigarette. At the same moment she saw Biran looking at her; and smiling up into the young man's eyes, she took a light from him. Slowly, she tested the cigarette, as she had seen Biran do. With a burst of laughter, VanSmythe dragged a chair in front of her. Several of the other women were smok-

ing; it was not that; but when he had first known Elsa, VanSmythe would not have offered her a cigarette. But events had proved that he had been a silly ass to have imagined all those moonshine things about the girl; all girls were alike, bless 'em. Rotten luck that Biran had beaten him to it; and for a day and a night things had looked pretty bad; but in the end he had come to see the logic of it—which was that the early bird gets the worm. However, it had surprised him when Elsa accepted the cigarette. By a mental process peculiar to himself, it was a test he applied to all women,—if they accepted a cigarette, all well and good. Under Mrs. Wingate's very nose, but for Elsa's ear alone, he made hay while the sun shone. "I've got my car outside. What do you say to cutting this?"

Did he really expect her to accept? In the second their eyes met over the glowing tip of Elsa's cigarette, the young man's heart lost a beat. Still, his eyes invited hers; and again he experienced the same feeling of surprise as when Elsa had taken a cigarette from his proffered case; for Elsa had risen, apparently meaning to go with him. She made her little bow to Mrs. Wingate, smiled at Miss Noreen and stood ready to go. She barely touched Biran's hand; she would not look at him; and the next moment, with young VanSmythe, she had left the room. Feeling his hand close over her arm, she did not repulse him. But once in the street, she dismissed him abruptly, without a word or a look, just as she had taken leave of Biran. Only VanSmythe would not let her go without protest. "Oh, I say, Miss Elsa—" But he could not follow her in the crowded street, calling her name. He had to let her go from him. He raised his hat to her back, and swore under

his breath at Biran. To spoil another man's game, and then refuse to play it himself. But above all he was glad, glad that Elsa had left him standing alone in the street, that the infallible test of the cigarette had for once failed.

Biran did not try to avoid his bad quarter of an hour.

With the closing of the door upon his last guest, uncertainty flared into sudden heat. What exactly had happened? Why had Elsa refused to look at him when she slipped past him, out of the studio? Why had she gone with that young bounder VanSmythe? She had no idea, she had seemed to have no slightest suspicion, that she was free to go with VanSmythe. The cigarette too; why had she taken a cigarette, and yes, smoked it in his, Biran's, very face? Why anyhow did she speak with VanSmythe at all? But at that Biran had the grace to be ashamed of himself.

Everything had happened exactly as he might have planned to have it happen. Elsa had interpreted the scene in the studio as he would have had her interpret it. He had deliberately neglected her, had shown every attention to Miss Wingate. But heavens above! That Elsa should think he was interested in that insipid pink-and-white Wingate girl when she, Elsa, was in the room. Anger came upon him; and he raged up and down the length of the studio, swearing he would not do it, loathing the very name of Wingate, hurling invectives at a Providence that wantonly created a lovely and lovable woman, only to curse her with that damnable thing called genius. It should not be. Memories in a host came trooping upon him. She had been an ugly little thing in those first days. But if he were quite honest with himself he would have to admit that even then there

had been in her some other genius than that of her music.

For a long time he remained motionless in the middle of the studio. Royally, Elsa had paid her woman's all. And he, Biran, having vouched for the worth of the bargain must see that she received her due.

A wry smile broke the line of his lips. It had become not only a question of her talent, but what he owed the girl herself. Her position that wretched afternoon had been only too obvious. His love had put her completely at the mercy of circumstance. And however lenient might be the curiosity of the world, in the end the object of it would be thrown aside on the scrap heap of a man's mistresses. Beyond the immediate moment of novelty he, Biran, would have no power to protect her. Not a little contemptuously, he very well knew how much the cloak of his celebrity covered, how much more than in reality there was to cover. It was this same cloak that would give Elsa refuge for a little while; but there would be only condemnation for the girl who had given herself in love to a man whose love defamed her. But Elsa need ask no charity. With the world at her feet, and a name and fame of her own, it would be for her to make terms, name her own conditions.

Bitterly, with a growing sense of his abiding loneliness, he wondered why he had not done as other men did,—married the girl who moved him to thoughts of marriage, as of all the women he had known Elsa alone had moved him. He looked around the rich, harmonious studio, upon the disordered tea table, remembered the inconsequent chatter that had filled his ears that afternoon; thought that if he wanted companionship, he would have to go forth into the garish streets, to

garishly lighted restaurants and theatres; remembered too how he had fled into the night from the oppression of the four walls inclosing him and Elsa together, away from the world. And all the time he knew that insidious temptation was warming his blood. Half way across the city Elsa was waiting for him, alone, even as he was alone. He had peremptorily sent Wilkes out of the room when he came to clear the tea table, had abruptly refused his suggestion of lights. What was it Elsa had said? That she was jealous of but one person in the world, of this man Wilkes, who served him. Looking out upon the darkening street, Biran laughed harshly. Was he after all merely the dupe of his own quixotic fancy? He half turned from the window. In ten minutes he could be on his way. But he did not touch the bell. Instead, he tantalized himself with a foretaste of Elsa's welcome, of her kindling eyes, her tender hands, her warmth and impetuous sweetness. She would be a little ashamed too, that she had taken VanSmythe's cigarette; a little contrite that she had denied Biran her eyes; ready and eager to make amends for the unhappiness of that wretched afternoon. He had not said half a dozen words to her, but he knew to the last detail of added colour in her cheeks that she had looked more lovely, even than with her usual loveliness, while she talked with VanSmythe.

Irresolute, tormented, he let the darkness close in around him.

He had not, after all, burned all his bridges behind him. . . .

If he could only be sure, quite sure, of himself.

Feeling his way in the dark, Biran crossed the room and touched the bell.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was not until he heard his voice giving the driver the address of Herr Zelinski, that he was sure he would not say Elsa's address instead.

The master was at home, and received Biran with a suspended look. The two men greeted each other with reserve. There had been something of a coolness between them since Biran had failed to carry out his part of the agreement about the Fräulein; plainly, the master was nursing a grudge; so Biran stated the simple fact without preamble. He had come to tell Zelinski that he was, once and for all, going to abandon the girl to her career. Zelinski was inclined to shrug his shoulders. He said nothing; the slight shrug was eloquent, the single gesture of his hands, voluble. He plainly doubted Biran's good faith; none the less, a smouldering look came into his eyes. It might be he had foreseen the inevitable end, and that hope had never quite fled from his heart. Was his friend Biran at last tired of the Fräulein? But he continued to say nothing, to put the burden of the conversation upon Biran, where he conceived that it belonged. And as briefly as might be, Biran told Zelinski his decision. Whether he would or no, hope shone forth in the master's eyes. He would not question Biran too closely. What did it matter why he wanted to free himself from the little Fräulein, so long as he left her quite free. It was a special dispensation of Providence in the Fräulein's behalf, that it was not

too late, that they had seen the folly of their ways before it was too late; his shrug became aggressive. He questioned suddenly, apprehensive. There would be no interruption, nothing to interfere with the Fräulein's work? For a dangerous moment, the two men glared at each other, Biran feeling his hand twitch with the sudden desire to punish; while he towered above the little man whose glance did not waver. The mad moment past, he knew the master's concern was so wholly concentrated on the subject of Elsa's musical future, that he might in the same spirit have asked if Biran was sure Elsa was in possession of all her ten fingers. After all, the bad moment left them in greater sympathy. Distrust had disappeared in the flare of anger. Only, if the Fräulein was to have any profit of her genius, she must go away alone, and work. Biran listened patiently while the master laid down conditions, exacted his promise. Zelinski had little faith in men, and a slight contempt for all women. But for the Fräulein he would have renounced even his bitterness and scorn against the world; and he was at least willing to take Biran's given word. They were both artists, in soul as well as in fact; and if Biran in his wisdom had let nothing interfere with his art, Zelinski in his folly had sacrificed all to his love. Already a little impatient, Biran agreed with Zelinski that no man can serve two masters; and no woman can live her life with a divided will; why was he here now but that he knew it so well for himself?

He grew suddenly irritable, anxious to escape from Zelinski's volubility. But already something, as yet outside himself, was rejoicing in its freedom. But Zelinski still detained him. Then, at the last, perhaps

relenting to Biran whom he would gladly have annihilated off the face of the earth for the further safeguarding of Elsa, Zelinski half promised that after all, it would only be for a year or two, when the Fräulein would be free to live her life as she pleased, without danger to her talent. Biran laughed, and went his way, leaving the master standing on his doorstep, where he had followed his departing guest. In a year or two, if chance threw them in each other's way he, Biran, and Elsa, would meet as the strangers they would then be. The memory of their love would separate rather than be a bond between them. He did not want Elsa to carry the dead thing that their love must come to be, in her heart; and he knew himself well enough to know that if not as he had loved Elsa, still, he would love again; and find inspiration again; so long as the power of creation endured in his heart and fingers. For he was alike victim and master of his fate. He might even loathe the swathed thing locked away in his work room; while without impulse, the will, to create, life meant nothing to him; and had he not always found his best and surest inspiration in the love of women . . . ? If he rendered her future back to Elsa, he kept no hope or desire of it for himself.

Elsa would go to Munich with Zelinski, who had made himself wholly responsible for her welfare. He had expressed his gratitude to Biran in a single gruff phrase; "It is well," he had said; and walking slowly down the street, away from the master's house, Biran said grimly to himself that life should find some better way than robbing Peter to pay Paul.

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Elsa's voice was in his ears, pleading for her happiness. Was he—breaking, or creating?

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A glance at his watch showed him it was verging upon eight o'clock. All over the city people were gathering for the pleasures of the evening. As he lingered along the street, a man and a woman came down the steps of a neighbouring house, and he saw the man gather the woman's evening cloak more closely into her hand; watched them down the street, the thought vivid in his mind of a certain long cloak Elsa had often worn, soft and mystifying and blue, like the silver-blue of a summer sky. But a strange disturbance lay in the thought, and he said to himself that his memory could encircle the world with ghosts of other evening cloaks. Must he see Elsa again? Why not leave it all to Zelinski, and tonight drop out of Elsa's life as completely as he had entered it? But he knew full well that if he disappeared tonight not to return, Elsa would wait; would not listen to Zelinski; would heed only the cry of her heart. Nothing save word out of his own mouth, would convince her of his faithlessness.

In another half hour, it would all be over and done with, past regret.

He had to walk some distance before he could get a street car. There was no chance of a taxicab in this out of the way street; perhaps the walk would serve to put into his mind the words he needed. But he found himself at Elsa's door without a coherent thought or a ready word; instead, he was reiterating it, monotonously, that this was the last time. . . .

Elsa opened the door to his knock at once, and he

read in her glance that she had been waiting, not quite expecting him, yet now that he was with her, knowing that he would come. Without a second thought, Biran caught her to him and kissed her. Then he abruptly let her go. There was something masterful, triumphant, in the look of his eyes that still held hers. "Whatever comes to you in life, you will never forget me, Elsa." Suddenly intimidated by the silence and Elsa's eyes, he knew no better way than to hurl the simple devastating fact into the silence. "This is the last time. I came to tell you." Presently, he wondered at his own calmness. But he did not quite dare to look at Elsa. He said to himself, It is the only way. The hour had struck. Emotion, regret, compunction, love itself, all must go into the crucible. And with the spoken words he felt again the premonitory stir within him of something waking to its freedom. He broke into rapid speech. "It had to be, some time. You must see for yourself—this sort of thing leads nowhere—in the end. You must make a place for yourself in the world, get full benefit of your talent. I have seen Zelinski, arranged everything with him. He will go to Munich with you, where there are great masters. In a year or two—" He found himself repeating it, helplessly, "in a year or two—" until the words reverberated in the silence of the room. Then he looked at her.

"I came to say good-bye."

They faced each other in a silence that seemed to grow, and enshroud them. Was it his own sudden fear he saw looking out of her eyes at him? Biran wrenched away his glance. He must not think of her, the warmth, the allure of her. He sought to fix his thought on some

actual, practical detail, as one seeks to touch the solid substance of the wall in a dark passageway. In a year or two, one can forget much.

He came back to her then, his hands behind his back. "You said to me once—I was a good teacher, that you learned much from me. Well, I have taught you all I can teach you. But there is much more, that you must learn for yourself, as we all have to learn,—here, there, everywhere. I meant—to teach you to love. And—I have loved you. So if there is anything to forgive, you must remember that I loved you, when I meant only to teach you to love."

The fear showed in her eyes now. It seemed as though she would never speak, never move, again; until her silence drove Biran to inconsequent speech. "We have been happy." Her eyes told him that she understood he was saying that hereafter their happiness lay apart, each from the other. "But happiness is like everything else in life—it either grows or it dies. And this afternoon—we must both have realized—that our time had come—you and I—that the need for life and more life—is upon us." He could not now tell whether Elsa heard and understood. Any other woman would long ago have flown to the inevitable conclusion. . . .

Then, slowly, her eyes lightened with a smile. "Is it—because I went with Mr. VanSmythe—this afternoon?"

Biran answered, "VanSmythe or another, what does it matter now."

"Theo—!"

He knew, with swift compunction, the cruelty of his retort. Yet with every word he spoke he felt intangible bonds loosening; something within him rejoiced as the

four walls receded. If only Elsa would say something, give him an opening; but her look baffled him. Then suddenly he realized that the silence of her waiting was not the silence of other times when he had come upon her waiting, with empty hands. Rather it was the quiescence of one who rests, in eager anticipation of work to be done. What a genius the girl had, with a look, a silence, to impregnate his imagination.

At last Elsa spoke. "You want me to go away—why?"

"I have told you."

"If you are thinking of me, Theo, I have told you before—I want nothing more than I have."

"It is not enough, Elsa."

"For—you, Theo?"

She had given him his cue. Biran said as lightly as he could manage, "I have my work, you know, Elsa."

She smiled at that. "You know it is not enough, only to work, Theo."

"No."

"I—I have helped you with your work."

"Yes. You have been an inspiration."

"Is that why you loved me?"

"You know why I loved you."

"Yes." Elsa's face lost something of its look of a mask, warmed a little.

"My work in the world is not yet done, and yours is scarcely commenced."

Suddenly, Elsa swayed a little. She seemed to emerge from under some dreadful oppression. In the eyes she raised to Biran there was the shadow of a smile, and a great wonder. She was still a little piteous, because

she had been afraid; but there was only love in her eyes now, and they looked suddenly young again. "Theo—"

At the sound of her low voice speaking his name, emotion quickened into the knowledge that he was losing her, and in the same instant Biran saw in her eyes something deeper than their loveliness; and with every faculty he could command he sought to imprint upon his mind the look he saw in her eyes, a look he had never before seen in a woman's eyes; what did it say, what reveal, what was it seeking to impart to him? Its mystery was not of the flesh, nor of the spirit, nor yet of the soul. It was flesh and soul and spirit triumphant.

His name on her lips, Elsa did not move or speak.

Biran was suddenly ashamed; but it was stronger than his strength, this other self that exacted to the last drop of blood its share of the spoils of any kill. Perhaps in the stillness and quiet of the room, it would reveal itself to him, the mystery he had glimpsed in Elsa's eyes. . . . Was it in her silence, in her sudden colour, in the slight movement passing over her body, like the wind waking in a tree? If only he could recall it, for the instant that would suffice to reduce it into the crucible of his fancy. But it was gone, as fleeting and elusive as the colour in a bird's wing against the summer sky. Again he blundered into words. "I want you to go with Zelinski, like a good girl, and when you are the great artist you will be—"

Elsa said quietly, "I—shall never play in public again, Theo."

Biran made shift to smile. "You will not only play again, but you will thank me."

"You mean—you want to go away—to leave me?"

The moment passed when Biran could have spoken. His silence told Elsa all his words had failed to tell her. He saw doubt grow into realization; her lowered lids shut her eyes from him for an instant; as if in sheer physical weariness. Then she looked at him. "I—will go away, as you wish. But not—with Herr Zelinski. Not—to Munich, Theo."

Biran was desperate. "Wherever you prefer. Paris, then. The only thing that matters is that you must not waste your talent for nothing." Did she smile at that? He had meant to cast her off; and instead he found himself persuading her. He hurried on. "There's nothing more in this kind of life for you. Some day you will understand—"

But the flicker of a smile on Elsa's lips did not endure beyond the instant. After a moment she said, a little diffidently, "It is—Miss Wingate?"

Biran could have laughed. Miss Wingate! when he had known the love of this girl. But it was over at last. What he had failed in courage to do, Elsa had done for him. The name of the other woman spoken between them, all had been said. And Elsa, strangely calm, strangely unmoved it seemed to Biran, stood waiting for him to go. Not quite knowing how to say the last word, not quite daring to look at Elsa, he yet had to take leave of her, to get out of the room somehow. He was thinking it was like Elsa not to upbraid him for his desertion, to accept his decision as proudly and humbly as she had accepted all things from him; beyond that single mention of the other girl's name, she made no protest, no outcry; yet would it not have been

more natural if she had shown emotion, had even resorted to tears? The silence lengthened. He still lingered about the room, fell into the banality of platitudes. "When you have all the world at your feet, you will value it more than you can now—the gift of your future that I have put into your hands—all that the world can give you." At the moment, his back was turned, or he would have seen that the look he could not fathom was in Elsa's eyes again. She said very quietly, "You have given me—far more than the world can ever give me, Theo."

He laughed, grimly, at that. "If you can say that to me, two years from now—" he did not try to keep the bitterness out of his voice; "when you have reaped some of the golden harvest of youth and talent, and known the love of other men, I wonder if you will even remember me to thank me for abandoning you to your glorious future!" Something startled him, and he turned to confront Elsa. Her hands thrust out against him, she backed away. "Theo—you mustn't say that to me—not now—Theo—" And now her composure was a thing of rags and tatters about her. "It's not—just me alone—now—" Her hands against her mouth, she strove to unsay the words. "I didn't mean to say it, I didn't mean to tell you—" She cowered away from Biran, as if to escape his look upon her.

Slowly, Biran understood. In that instant he could not move, could not have raised a hand; all his world was toppling about him; while Elsa grew very still, her eyes on his.

"I'm sorry, oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—to say it."

Then Biran came to life. Sorry! Every drop of

blood in his body put warmth into his voice. "Elsa—" For the space of a breath Elsa gave herself to him. But when she drew herself away he knew it was useless to try to hold her by the sheer force of his arms. Once it had been enough, when her whole world lay within the circle of his arms; just as now there were deeper depths in her eyes; that look he had not fathomed. . . . He laughed the low, triumphant laugh of a man who feels strength in his arms, and hope in his heart. Fate had snapped her fingers in his face; and he felt a great peace descending upon the world. He followed Elsa the step or two she had taken away from him. "Why did you not tell me before?"

"I—came to the studio."

The silence widened, deepened between them. Then Elsa said, "I am glad—you do not mind." Biran was humble, abashed, before her. He did not know how to say what was in his heart. Already his thoughts had encompassed the future. But he did not quite know how to say it, the thought big in his heart and mind. It seemed somehow brutal to speak to Elsa of marriage . . . but it must be said. But she eluded his touch, melted out of his arms. "Elsa—will tomorrow be too soon?" She gave no sign that she heard or understood. Yet she had always understood; he must trust her to understand now. "You know, dear, we shall have to go through the ceremony.—Be married, you know, Elsa." He could not read her silence; it rendered him uneasy; while his self-consciousness grew. He felt himself utterly mean and unworthy. He was as awkward and tongue-tied as a youth in the throes of calf-love. He tried to mask his embarrassment in lighter speech. "I hope you will not mind—too much—being

my wife instead of a celebrity in your own right."

Slowly then Elsa turned her face to him, let him look into her eyes, where all the bitterness of the moment was there for Biran to see. If love had not been done to death in her heart, her girlhood's youth was dead in her eyes. It was then fear struck deep into Biran's heart. He approached her half in anger, half appealing. "Elsa! You don't think I care a hang about her, that girl, or any other woman in the world."

"I understand—you could have done very well without—me, Theo. Any other woman—can give you a child."

"Elsa, you are unfair!" She smiled slowly. She seemed too weary to combat him; physically weary, as one who has come a long, long way upon a difficult road. She only waited for him to go. Was it uncompromising youth, or was life itself arrested in her veins for the moment? giving her strength to wait quietly, silent, until the closing door should have shut her away from him. To all Biran's protestations her silence made but one response; it was not anger, not pride; she did not want what was not her own; she would have gone—she had gone—with her lover to the ends of the world; but she would not marry this man who had come to tell her that he chose to put her out of his life.

Pale and composed, she was less like a shadow of herself than the foreshadowing of another Elsa that was to be. The pulse suddenly awakened in Biran's temple; of what avail were all the words in the world? He would woo her as he had not yet wooed her, he would win her as he had never yet won her. . . .

But her slight gesture stopped him before he moved.

He had to accept it at last, that she meant him to go.

But it was the realization of her physical weariness that induced him to leave her. He saw that she watched him while he looked around for his hat, and spoke to her of the morrow; she remained quite still while he went to the door; and he knew she was waiting for him to go.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOUR and twenty hours passed, and Biran had not again seen Elsa. He had gone to her the morning of the next day, and again in the evening. There had been no sound behind the closed door; but to his inquiry Mrs. Hester had said the young lady had not gone out. But she had seen Elsa in the course of the morning, and she was not ill; Biran could not force himself upon her; although he returned, irresolute, to the door; then he had come away and gone back to the studio. For a night and a day the still-born hope had companioned him, as unescapable as a living presence. If Elsa would not relent, he had at least some right, the right at least to speak to her of his child. Alone in the studio, with no eyes to see, the hot colour dyed Biran's face. His child. . . .

In his extremity, he went to see Miss Noreen.

The actress, dressed for the street, received him at once. With one eye on the clock, she came forward to meet him, and seeing his haggard eyes, the worn lines of his face, instantly divined his trouble. "Elsa?"

Biran could find no better way to say it than in the words Elsa had used. In mingled pride and misery, keenly aware of his own conflicting emotions, he answered that it was not Elsa alone now—

"Ah!" Beyond that, Miss Noreen was silent. Then she smiled. Apparently neither too surprised, nor taking the news too much as a matter of course, she said simply, softly, "Elsa must be very happy."

The simple fact that Miss Noreen had to keep one eye on the clock, that she continued drawing on her gloves, helped Biran to face his difficulty. He came to it bluntly; in the fewest possible words he admitted that Elsa would not see him, that she refused to consider the future. Miss Noreen's glance met his tentatively. Shorn of its sentimental trappings, and resolved to its simplest form, the situation became plainly a practical problem that had to be met with the greatest expediency. And for the second while their glances contended, antagonism flared between them, the instinctive antagonism between man and woman that, strangely enough, the actress had never felt on her own account, and that now suffused her pale skin with sudden colour. All in a moment, thinking of Elsa, she plunged into her own past. While in the midst of his perplexity and anxiety, Biran wondered for the hundredth time, what was the secret of this wonderful woman. . . . With her unfailing instinct of comprehension, Noreen saw it would serve no purpose to ignore the crude fact of his difficulty. He wanted her to see Elsa, to succeed where he had failed, to convince the girl of the necessity of an immediate marriage, to round out their romance for them into matter-of-fact reality. "I will do what I can, of course. In any event, I will look after her." And all the time the minutes were flying. Were it her own heart instead of her friend's that was being torn with sorrow and uncertainty, still must she not forget her waiting audience. She fastened the furs close about her throat, rose, offered to set Biran down somewhere; but he thanked her, preferring to walk. He had nowhere to go. But she would let him hear from her at the earliest possible moment? and they

parted on the actress' promise to see Elsa the first thing the next morning.

The following noon a note from Miss Noreen told Biran Elsa would see him; merely that. It had crossed his mind that Noreen approved Elsa's refusal to marry him; even if she had consented to counsel the girl to do so. But he did not doubt her good faith, and he called her on the telephone, seeking reassurance, which her brief note did not give him, and in the end asked if he might come to see her before going to Elsa. Uneasiness gained upon him. All the way to Noreen's hotel he was fighting off the fear that it might be useless to go to Elsa. Had he not time and again thanked his star of peace for that adamant quality in Elsa that made her accept, without repining, what was inevitable in a situation. It all came back to him, incident after incident, of her quiet acquiescence in all things his will had imposed upon her. She had come away with him to the cottage without a question or a fear or a doubt, with a fearless acceptance of his love and all it imposed upon her. The swift memory came to him of that first moment of passion, when body and soul the girl had passed into his keeping. She was such a little thing . . . so brave, so tender, so generous, and sweet. There had been other moments, the memory of which now ached in his throat; for he had not always been gentle with her; it was the very steadfastness of her trust that while yielding had saved their love to them; perhaps when he had loved her least he had exacted most from her. He had been for so long unmoved he had all but accepted it, the slow waning of the fires of body and soul; he had lived idly, letting the months

slip past into the years, spending profitless days in aimless wandering; had, in this barren mood, even drifted upon the far shores of a life so foreign to him as the life and pastures of his old friend Elton. And there, in the first spontaneous impulse he had felt for years, he had undertaken to play Providence to this little ugly duckling who had become to him—Elsa! He had kissed her that first time with no more thought for her than a bee has for the flower at which it pauses for a second to extract a drop of its sweetness. For whatever had been his plan for her future, the girl had been no more to him than a pathetic little thing he had saved from the dust of the roadside. Then he had kissed her again.

. . . There had been moments when her youth maddened him; when the brighter flame of her virgin passion made his kisses seem cold against the warmth of her lips; until the thought of his own waning youth bit into him, corroding, driving him with the scourge of a thousand passionate regrets. And always Elsa had smiled.

The little pulse in his temple was beating monotonously, painfully. With the last drop of blood in his body he knew that Elsa too, had not forgotten. In his arms, she would remember. . . .

He reached for the speaking tube, but when the driver asked what was wanted, Biran told him to drive on. The unnamed, unacknowledged fear was upon him again. For Elsa had not let him even touch her hand—One after another, provoking, tantalizing thoughts passed through his mind; of the months they had been together at the cottage; of Elsa, radiant, piquant, rousing his man's curiosity only the more generously to fulfil the exactions of the lover. And yet, there had

always been that in her silence that baffled him; but her silences had become so rare he had almost forgotten them. But now again, she had been silent, and in silence had watched him go. She had meant not to see him again. What had Noreen said to her? What would he say to her? She had not let him touch her hand. But it was preposterous that the coming of a child, the natural bond between a man and a woman, should now threaten to separate them. He discounted his uneasiness with all he had ever heard of the capriciousness of women in Elsa's condition. Above all, he *had* given her cause for anger against him, for just resentment. He had been a blackguard, and had acted like a fool. But he had suffered. It had not been an easy thing to do, what he had intended to do. For was she not his last link with youth! He would perhaps have loved other women; yet it could never be what loving Elsa had been. Other women—what could they have been to him other than the chance note of a passing bird's song, heard for a second, only to be forgotten for all time. But Elsa . . . there had been moments when she had sung herself into the very song of his life. It was his curse and his safeguard, that he could never quite forget himself save in the moment of creation; so now, he asked himself bitterly if this love for Elsa had been given him to teach him what his extravagant passions had not taught him. And like a cool little wind at the end of a hot day, reviving, refreshing, the thought of the future with Elsa entered into his heart. Elsa—his wife—their child—home.

Scorning his man-made plans, fate had decreed for the larger plan of his destiny. Elsa was to learn the

whole lesson of life with him. He had taught her love; and now her young body would know full fruition of that love. His face blanched at the sudden thought; life and love were cruel to women; but Elsa was brave and tender, and fearless before whatever life asked of her. A mysterious, ineffable understanding crept into his heart. Life had been asking for bread, and he had thought to content it with a stone!

He had spoken to Elsa of fame and a career, and had been angry when she so calmly refused the gift of them from his hands; he had even tried to tempt her with the applause and adulation of strangers; had dangled the bait of other loves before her; and all the time the wonder and mystery of her look had eluded him. He had tried to fathom it, to divine its source, that he might make it his own—an added knowledge in his mind and fingers. But he was no longer smiling. What would Elsa say to him? Elsa, who carried the joy of life in her heart, and whose body already knew the wonder of creation. . . .

Why was he not on his way to Elsa? Why this delay, when she must be waiting for him? He spoke sharply to the driver, was out of the taxicab before the man could bring it to the curb.

Miss Noreen dispelled his anxiety about Elsa in a word. She was quite well. And Biran asked abruptly, "Will she listen to reason?"

Miss Noreen did not repress a smile. "You mean will she do what you ask?"

Biran seemed to tower above her in righteous indignation. "It's the same thing. In this case there can be no question."

"There is always a question when the personal equation enters a situation."

All his fear and doubt returned upon Biran. Perhaps he had counted more on Noreen's influence with Elsa than he had admitted to himself. He cast aside his hat. "I'll admit I bungled things like the veriest idiot. But how was I to know? I still believe I was justified in doing what I tried to do. You know as well as I do that Elsa had a real talent."

Miss Noreen permitted herself a smile. "Already we speak of it in the past tense—"

Biran had the grace to show colour. "She never wanted, she had always refused, to play in public, what she called 'before strangers.'" And seeing Miss Noreen waited for more, he added, "She refused to play—because she was happy." They smiled a little at that, at the child Elsa was. Then the actress said slowly, "So you were going to abandon her upon the desert island of her blighted affections that she might seek solace in her art."

"It was the only way I knew."

"Was it quite kind, quite—necessary?"

"Do you think it was easy for me?"

Ever so slightly, the slender, expressive figure of the actress drew itself out of her chair. "I was thinking—were you quite unselfish in your renunciation, my friend?"

Biran had no wish to dissemble. He met her eyes simply, frankly. "When I tell you that since I have known Elsa I have wanted a child—" He made simple confession of his innermost heart.

There was more of wistfulness than amusement in the

woman's eyes, as she said, "And you considered it a weakness you must not indulge."

"No. I often wished I had the supreme disregard of strength, that is wiser than reason. Of course, at first, I honestly believed love was the hand-maiden of art." He smiled drily. "I used rather to pride myself that the man in me had to wait on the artist. You see, I did love Elsa. All the beauty and all the fascination of all the women I have known and loved, never even suggested to me what this simple, unpretentious Elsa made me feel." One by one, he was taking up and carefully examining the bibelots arranged on a table at his elbow. Then he looked up and smiled at Noreen, the smile all women found hard to resist. "I do not know why I never loved you, who will understand all I want to say. Elsa could not understand. It is all as inexplicable as that.

"Partly, too, because I wanted her so much, I felt I had forfeited all right to her. I told myself I had no right—to anything—unless I could give it back to her in still greater measure. You see, a friend of mine wanted to marry her. And I let him think—lightly of Elsa. After that, of course, I had to put all thought of her out of my head. If I had won her, man from man—but I sacrificed her good name to her musical career—so there was nothing left for me but to keep my promise—that she should have a career. That later, I loved her—gave me no greater right to knock her artistic future into a cocked hat. I had promised to teach Elsa to love; nothing more. Yet once—I almost married her." He looked up suddenly, met Noreen's eyes, and did not again look away. "But all the time I knew her youth belonged to herself, to her talent. You see, I

really meant that Elsa should be one of the great artists of her day." He was a little incoherent, a little irrelevant, feeling his way among past emotions, temptations, piecing it all together for himself, now that he had glimpsed the design of a master hand greater than his own. "And then one day, as such things happen, I felt the old desire to be at work again, so we came back to New York, and I forgot everything else." After a moment, he spoke again. "She meant rest to me when I was tired; and new faith when things did not go quite right with my work. And she refused to play because she was happy."

Very still in her big chair, Miss Noreen said no word.

"Then one day I came on Elsa, sitting with empty hands, waiting—

"There might have been better ways than the way I chose, but we are all limited by our individual experiences. And I thought the ultimate lesson of love for Elsa must be sorrow and disillusionment. It was in misery and lost faith that I first had any profit of my talent, when there was only my work to which to turn from the woman who had taught me to love, and then left me nothing—to love."

In the silence each drew apart with his own thoughts. For the moment, Noreen was not thinking of Elsa. There was no hint of reproach in her silence, no pity, nor lack of sympathy, in her eyes. It may be Biran still waited for some augury of Elsa's relenting; and despite Noreen's refusal to say more than her note had told him, now that he was with her, he had been reassured of her worldly wisdom no less than of her emotional comprehension. She was so calm and gentle, surely Elsa must have been convinced.

Presently he came to stand before her, intent upon his own dilemma, seeking as one seeks in lonely places, the warmth and comfort of another human being. Yet for the moment he was keenly aware of the woman, as he looked down at the quiet figure motionless in the big chair; at the face that was something more than merely beautiful. Even in that moment he could not but wonder how there had resulted between them a friendship that defied gossip and their own susceptible temperaments. Through all the years of their intimacy, they had never lost the little quickening interest that is more easily dulled than roused, between man and woman. In his cynical moments Biran would have said it was exactly the kiss that had never been given that was the actress' great charm for him. While Noreen had once said, merrily if quite honestly, that it gave her a sense of security to know there was in the world such a man as Theodore Biran whom she could have loved, and yet cleverly managed not to love. And needing a friend he had come to her; just as she for the first time, drew the mask from before her face.

Scarcely two hours had passed since she had seen Elsa, Elsa with her eyes of a child and her woman's heart; Elsa who would not yield a single birth pang that would give her child into her arms, for all that the world could offer her. For a moment the actress' eyes closed over memories of the living tragedy of her own youth. For she had had to renounce in secrecy the happiness that had come to Elsa. It was the price life had exacted of her, the price she had paid. Her lover had married her as negligently as he had loved her; and she went to live with him in his house. But her arms and heart had always remained empty for the little

child she had renounced in fear and shame. And when her husband taunted her, she went out into the streets, alone. Her further story was that of the actress Noreen, brilliant, beloved, unloving, whose art was too exacting, she herself too indifferent, to yield more to love than a passing condescension. But she had taken Elsa to her heart with a tenderness as great and kind as though the girl were the little child for whom her arms had never ceased their longing. So now she did not look at Biran, for there was that in her eyes that even her good friend must not see. He had returned from his restless wanderings around the room, was again engrossed with the bibelots on the little table. "You see, I had to do something—definite. It had been going on for a year, and Elsa scarcely touched her violin because she was happy.

"You do not know Elton, do you?" He smiled a little grimly. "Well, Elton is a man who has bartered his artist's soul in exchange for what he conceived to be his happiness. I spent some weeks with him once, and it was at his studio that I met Elsa. He had already, for years, in the service of his happiness, been parceling out his talent until it was worn threadbare, and feeling grateful to the great folk who despoiled him, soul and spirit. There was a wife, and children, and a much-upholstered abode that spoke well for the measure of Elton's success; and there was Elton himself. But when I asked him to play to me—he begged off; and I did not insist; a man does not like to look upon a once precious thing that has been done to death. And I saw it would happen again, to Elsa. So I brought her away." Carefully, he replaced upon the table the shattered fragments of a miniature chalet he had

crushed between his fingers. "Do you think she will never play again?"

Noreen did not answer at once. "A woman—and an artist—ask such different things from life."

"And Elsa?"

"One way or another, I think it will all be made right to Elsa."

Miss Noreen had risen and now came to stand near Biran. She was his friend who had great tolerance, and if she had said no word to convince or persuade the girl, she had brought a message to Biran that Elsa would see him. In her heart of hearts, she would have spared them both; for to serve one would have been to betray the other; such love as survived would remain to them only for the service of half-gods. She was kind; and her own heart had been wrung; but she had not lived the years of her life and won subtle comprehension of human strength and weakness, without learning that all things in life were comparative, few final, none annihilating. Somehow, one went on living.

The moment for emotion was past. And they returned to the point whence they had started, the crude fact of Biran's difficulty, Elsa's refusal to marry him. Instantly, Biran recognized her altered mood, perceived the girding up of the actress' thoughts. Unextinguishable youth was in her face again; her very body, her every movement, had recovered its accustomed vitality, was instinct with vivid life. And once again his attention concentrated. He said abruptly, "Whatever happens, I wanted only to make it possible for Elsa to live her life to the utmost." Was it the ghost of his own doubt he saw in the calm eyes that regarded him so kindly? Those inscrutable, heavy-lidded eyes that saw

all things, made all things their own, only to give back all they saw. But Noreen was thinking that in the story of his love for the girl there was more grain among the chaff than she would have believed possible, in the love of a man like her friend Biran. For the first time in his life he was forced to gather the fruits of the seeds he had sown.

The antagonism that had smouldered in her eyes had long since distilled into that understanding that is beyond blame. This man had spoken the truth of his heart to her. He had dared to play with destiny, staking another's happiness; yet now it was he who stood to win or lose; for it would all be made right to Elsa in her child. Noreen spoke to him gently. "It is only that we cannot live other people's lives for them. If we try to do that we are foredoomed to fail them in some great essential.

"Your house was divided against itself from the very first, my friend. You should not—have loved Elsa. Or you should—only have loved her. Confused among your own paths, how could you undertake to show her the way?"

Biran laughed, frankly bitter. "When in all my life have I had the great good fortune to act on a simple direct motive? Always the ways multiply before me. I might as well have tried to live my life with the mad sanity of the contented man in the street. I could have married Elsa, and made her the mother of our children, and thought no more of her genius, so long as it did not interfere with our domesticity. But it would have been like robbing a friend's house when he had intrusted you with the keys. Then we came back to town. I have told you—I looked at Elsa, and saw her face in marble.

For days at a time I would not think of her, except to be glad she was there at the end of the day's work—"

Miss Noreen was looking straight into his eyes. "So—that is how it happened."

The quiet words flecked Biran like a whip lash. His face was white, then suddenly red. Why was he wasting precious minutes talking to this passionless woman when Elsa was waiting for him to come to her? But he could not escape the cold, sombre eyes, condemning him now with the words out of his own mouth, "So that is how it happened." Noreen's look seemed to rend the fabric of his words, revealing the nakedness of his soul. He was like a man suddenly exposed to the bleak cold of a winter wind. Ghosts and shadows beset his way, followed close upon his heels; and they were like all the days of his life passing in procession before him, holding out empty hands; some with laughing mouths, many wistful-eyed, all strangely silent, all asking something from him. He had thought mirth and joy the familiars in his house of life, but now they slipped past him, grey, pallid shapes, less real than all the others,—the despicable, the worthy; impulse, motive,—tossing among them the restless craving soul of the artist, the pulsing, wayward heart of the man; what four walls of any man's life could hope to give shelter and warmth and sustenance to such a warring company? Then with a single wave of his hand Biran dismissed the disquieting array. He even smiled, as he took Miss Noreen's hand in farewell. For after all, he had not loved Noreen, beautiful, captivating woman that she was; instead he had loved Elsa, with her sweet eyes and kind hands. And Elsa was waiting for him. . . .

Without another word to Noreen, he left the room, eager, impatient, to be on his way to Elsa.

Adroitly on her part, or accidentally, Biran could not say, but he entered Elsa's room to find himself facing her across the width of a table on which lay a violin—his violin that he had given her, and that he tried now not to see. Its isolation upon the table defied him. After the first disconcerting moment, when it seemed to intrude upon them as though it were another person in the room, the violin ceased to exist for Biran. He had eyes and thought only for Elsa. But he did not try to take her hand. His whole plea was in his voice speaking her name. "Elsa—"

In the silence, the faint, dull roar of the traffic in the streets grew louder to their ears.

"Come back with me to the cottage, Elsa."

Later, Biran could not have said if Elsa were beautiful in the long minutes that they looked at each other, or if the day and night had ravaged her face, dimmed her youth and freshness. If he so much as noticed the pallor where he was accustomed to see colour in her cheeks, it was with a greater tenderness for her. His heart in his eyes, he sought to reach her across the deepening depths. He advanced the step nearer that brought him very close to her. "If I have not always loved you as you had the right to be loved—I never loved any one more than I loved you. If I let you think there was some one else, it was stupid, cruel, but it was not the truth. I was thinking at least as much of you—as I was thinking of myself." Was that at last a confession to himself? an acknowledgment of conflicting motives, the repudiation of impulses that would have

driven him to the parting of their ways. "I had promised you a career, Elsa. You had already given me more than I had a right to take from you. But when you had made sure of your future, all the years to come would have been yours to do with as you chose."

Very quietly, Elsa spoke for the first time. "So that is what you thought of me?"

Like a touch on a fresh wound, other words sounded in his ears. "So that is how it happened," Noreen had said. He grew dogged. What did it matter how things happened, wisely or mistakenly? The all-important thing was that this wonderful thing had happened to Elsa and himself. He had honestly thought he had no right to ask her for a child. Life had willed otherwise. He was impatient, eager, marvelling a little at Elsa that she too was not eager and glad. "You were not just a girl like any other girl that a man might love, and marry, to the ends of marriage."

Elsa raised her eyes to his. "Was it not enough, did it not give you right enough, that I loved you?"

"I had to think of you—"

Patently, gravely, Elsa listened. "You are not thinking of me, even now, Theo." She said it without resentment, without bitterness. "You would have sacrificed me to my career. I was happy, and you would have taken happiness from me to give me a career—something I did not want. Now—you would sacrifice my career—to my child."

There was a relentless logic, a clairvoyance, in her thoughts that turned words to empty hollow sounds on Biran's lips. Desperately at last, he demanded to know if she loved him. And in the banality, the futility, of

the words, he seemed to acknowledge defeat. He saw she was no longer on her guard against his touch, her fearlessness of it rendering her safe from coercion. But neither was he given to yielding. Fate had always dealt generously with him. Even now there was, somewhere, the word to convince Elsa; yet what use to say to her she was cruel, wrong, wilful; when he doubted the power of his arms to hold her. Only the moment before, with a regretful gesture, Elsa had pushed the violin toward him. "I am sorry—I disappointed you. I would have liked to do what you wanted me to do." And Biran had waved it aside, the violin and her words.

Little arid silences fell between their speech; difficult pauses, when the very excess of their emotion rendered them dumb. Once Biran said, and for the second time that day, having no words of his own he repeated Elsa's, "It is not you and I alone, now, Elsa." He knew it was not his voice speaking to her but some inner warmth of feeling, that brought the instant response of faint colour to her cheeks. Slow anger surged up in him, the anger of helplessness, of the strong man held at bay by invisible, intangible forces. Then before Elsa could divine his intention, he had her hands in his, was drawing her to him; and she let her hands lie passively in his grasp. He released her then, stood looking down at her, powerless before her. But he could still hurt her; in futile anger he sought to make her reveal the vulnerable spot,—some weakness, a tenderness, a memory. What she refused for herself, she had no right to deny to another, to their child. Coldly, deliberately, he said to her:

"You have no right to deny the child an honourable name."

Waves of hot, difficult colour burned Elsa's face; but with a physical effort she made herself meet his eyes. "A child has the right to its mother's name."

So she had thought of that, this little Elsa who had not been wont to give thought beyond the moment of her happiness. "Elsa, do you realize what you are saying?"

She smiled a little at that, with a dreary patience. "I have lived, and been happy, without the protection of your name, Theo. The shame would be—to be ashamed now. And that—I am not. That would be the wrong—to my child—to be ashamed."

"Think of me then."

He held her so close, he could feel her heart beat against his, and his lips were on her face. She was such a little thing he gathered her into his arms as though she were a child; but something had gone out of her, had been replaced by something with which he could not cope; had she resisted him, he would have hoped; had she even feared his touch he could have held her against her will; but quiet and passionless, if her eyes did not deny that she loved him, body and soul she rejected him, refused his love. It came to Biran on a wave of bitterness that he had only his own folly to thank. After all, he alone of all the world had a right to this girl's lips. It was more than a lover's kiss that reddened her cheeks, pale her lips. He whispered to her, "Little wife," and felt her slender body quiver in his arms. But even as he kissed her he knew it availed him nothing, to kiss her. He thrust her from him, then. He had to accept it at last, that nothing out of the past could help him; yet as surely life held new

zest for him. Dreams he had half-shamefacedly dreamed, were to come true at last. For he meant to have his way, having always had it. He would be patient, remembering Elsa had had great provocation; but he could not admit such a possibility as the door closing between them. He was not beaten, but triumphant. He had always loved Elsa; now there was added reason for loving her. All the barren years of his life with their stupid pleasures and pleasant stupidities, were less to him than a glance of this girl's eyes, with its sweet, calm assurance, of promise and fulfilment. He saw in her eyes great sadness and a greater hope. Slowly, he realized it was another Elsa than the kind, immature girl he had loved, and who through his love had become this other Elsa, with new and mysterious wonders darkening her eyes; her very silence was now fraught with myriad meanings and a deep knowledge, that the look of her eyes, the touch of her hands, revealed to him. He no longer tried to force her to look at him. When she moved away and stood looking out of the window, he watched for some slight irresolution in her movements, an indecision, in which he could surprise and overwhelm her; but he saw it was not the moment to woo and compel her; curbing his own rising elation, for this time he must leave her to her silence, ask nothing for himself, until she was ready to listen to her own heart.

After a moment, he crossed the room, took her hand, gently, not to alarm her. He could wait to kiss her lips. Today he would be content with her hand. He held it in his own, rosy palm upward, before kissing it; little hand that once had looked empty to him and that now held the future of the world within the nest of its

slender, curving fingers. He could kiss her hand, thinking of the moment when he would kiss her lips. . . . So he took leave of her, without a spoken word; and out in the street, unconsciously he held his head higher, and there was a spring in his walk.

CHAPTER XXV

BIRAN'S first thought on awakening the next morning was of the earliest possible moment that he could go to Elsa. It was then eight o'clock, and he decided that as Elsa herself had usually been at the studio by nine, he could this morning go to her at that hour. He did not admit there was any uncertainty in his mind, any slightest doubt, or perturbation. The high mood of the previous afternoon, when he felt the horizons of his life widening before him, still lingered in his heart, quickened his pulse. Leaving Elsa, he had walked all the long distance back to the studio, and had spent the evening alone, companioned by thoughts and memories and anticipations that still lingered in his eyes this morning. In the meantime, he would dress and breakfast, and the time would pass as all time passes—at last. He had kept vigil late into the night; there had been moments when he thought the dark hours interminable, that dawn would never come; and sometimes he smiled to himself, thinking that perhaps Elsa too was wakeful, was thinking of him, that their thoughts each of the other perhaps met and mingled across the void of the night. He could understand her reserve, even her coldness. Was it not this same incorruptible maidenliness that he loved best of all in her? Other women had given him passion; Elsa alone had given him love; and in the very moment when she had withdrawn herself from him, had denied him more than the

touch of her unresponding hand, she had never seemed nearer or dearer to him, more alluring, more desirable.

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He rang the bell for Wilkes, impatient to be at least preparing to go to Elsa. And while he listened to the subdued sound of water running into the tub, he told himself that Elsa would have repented having been unkind to him; but if by any chance she still persisted in being difficult, he knew for what he waited. There had been other occasions, trivial in themselves but not too insignificant to recall now, when Elsa had in the end come to him and put her hand into his, royally making amends for her wilfulness. Well, after today, there would be no more of divided will or purpose, in their house of life. An abler master of destinies than he had proved to be, had dealt with them graciously and generously. The world stood still around him as he thought how nearly he had made the one irretrievable blunder. As easily as not, he might have lost Elsa out of his life. . . .

He hurried with his careful dressing, hurried a little with his breakfast, only to linger over his cigarette, as the hands of the clock drew on to the moment when he could be on his way. He was about to call for his hat when Wilkes entered the breakfast room with a letter—two letters—Biran saw, as the man presented them to him; holding the letters in his hand, his eyes were fixed on a violin case that Wilkes carried, his violin case, Biran instantly recognized it.

“A messenger just brought them, sir, the letters and the violin. There was no answer, the boy said, sir.” Wilkes hesitated an instant, whether to leave the violin,

or take it into the music room. But after that first half-questioning, half-comprehending glance at the violin, Biran seemed to forget both the instrument and Wilkes, who held it tentatively; until the man, venturing to act upon his own judgment, deemed it best to withdraw, and took the violin with him. His master still regarded the two letters he held in his hand as the door closed softly.

The thin grey one was from Miss Noreen, Biran had recognized the handwriting at once. The other, somewhat thicker,—he had not needed to look at the small, legible writing to know that it must be from Elsa. Then he remembered the violin, and saw that Wilkes was gone, and the violin with him. As he tore open the envelope addressed in Noreen's handwriting, he took time to remark that women were born melodramatists; why should Elsa return the violin—now? He would see what Noreen had to say, and then he would read Elsa's letter. He had never had a letter from Elsa before. In the meantime, he opened Noreen's letter; and would have read it at a glance. But he had to go back to the beginning, to the opening sentence again. He read the note through, to the end, and once again turned back to the first page, and sat looking at it, as if still not quite certain he had read it aright. One after another the sentences looked up at him, meaningless, yet somehow shaping into menacing form. They said he was not to worry about Elsa. She would be well taken care of. It appeared she was with Noreen. "Her letter to you goes with mine." He said the words over to himself, then once again turned the page. "On the whole, perhaps you wrought better than you knew. Let that console you."

Was the woman mad! Biran had Elsa's letter in his hand now; with a single swift movement he opened it and tore out the sheets of note paper wedged tightly into the envelope. After all, it was natural Elsa should have turned to the older woman. He was grateful to Noreen for being kind to her.

He read the first line of Elsa's letter . . . "Theo, dear, this is the first letter I have ever written to you."

What was there in the simple words that made his heart lose a beat? Their very simplicity seemed like the sound of her voice, speaking to him. And her voice, to him, had always been kind and gentle. He glanced hastily at the clock. He would read the letter, and be off at once. Only, he wished she had waited for him in her own rooms. Somehow, he could not visualize her so well among strange surroundings. She seemed so a part of certain pictures. . . . Then he read her letter. "Theo, dear, this is the first letter I have ever written to you. I wish I could have said it to you this afternoon, what is in my heart; but I couldn't think in words when you were there. Only—I want you to know I am not sorry, nor ashamed, nor regretting, anything that has happened. I wouldn't have had—anything—different in my life since you came into it. I am afraid I cannot make you understand; you are so sure you know what is right to do; and I am not going to let you do it. When I let you kiss my hand a little while ago, I knew it was the end for us, Theo, that I would never, if I could help it, see you again. I knew you meant to come back, that you only went away because you meant to come back. I watched you go down the street as far as I could see you from the window. And now I am writing this letter to you—

"You see, Theo, it doesn't matter after all that it wasn't Miss Wingate. The only thing that matters is that it would not have been *me*, always. So you see, nothing—really—has changed. You didn't mean me to have a child. And I didn't mean to tell you—after I understood you had come to say good-bye. It doesn't really matter *why* you wanted me to go away; you should have known I would not choose to leave you. That is why it doesn't matter that it wasn't Miss Wingate. Only—I had forgotten how pretty she was—Miss Wingate—until I saw her sitting at the tea table that day. So I took the cigarette.

"You see, I came to the studio to tell you—and another girl was sitting in my place at the tea table, and I knew that her right there was better than mine, because of course I had no right there at all. But even then I wasn't sorry. Because I believe you did love me. All those months at the cottage, you did love me, Theo. Wasn't I the girl you had chosen out of the world of girls, to love? But love has never been enough for you, Theo. If today you had been just glad—but even this once you could not forget that everything between us was not quite as it should have been. Even this one time you could not love me as I wanted you to love me, taking all my love had to give you. Right away you wanted something else—wanted to make me your wife—to give me something else in the place of what I had.

"I can't say it any other way, Theo, but from that moment everything you did, everything you said, had nothing to do with *me*. It isn't pride in me, dear. Maybe it's just that I'm afraid,—I do not know. But I think it is because I could never have forgotten that I

was there with you not because you chose it so, the thing out of all the world that you wanted, but because something had happened that you never meant should happen. Oh, I know you believed in my talent. I do not know, if you hadn't come into my life, if I should have gone on trying to learn to play. And yet I might have. It was the only door in my life that opened outward—until you came. So perhaps I would have gone on trying to play my way out of myself. But don't you know that when a woman loves a man, she hasn't the will nor the heart to deny herself, nor him? I would have loved to wash and cook and scrub for you, Theo. I am like that. I wanted everything love could give me. Sometimes I used to think—you were afraid of love—

“But the baby will be mine, oh, for ever and ever so long; and I can do for it what I could never do for you, all the things my heart and hands have longed to do for you, Theo. So you mustn't be sorry for me that this has happened, and don't be unkind to yourself about it. The baby will be to me what your work has always been to you, Theo. I shall be thinking of you busy in your work room, where I was never quite welcome; and now I too have work to do, Theo, for the first time in my life.

“I am afraid you will be angry with me. I can't even hope you will quite understand, although I've tried to tell you everything just as I feel it in my heart. But try to understand this, Theo; it isn't as if I was denying you something that was really yours. It was not your wish. It was not even—love. You must have been ashamed of your folly—you would have called it that.

“Perhaps neither of us quite realized that the world

was really ours, Theo. But one learns. In a thousand different ways, one learns.

"I shall always love you, Theo, best in all the world; but I beg you not to try to see me again. Please. I would have come to you myself if I could have come at all.

"I am returning the violin."

"Elsa."

When an hour and more had elapsed past the time about which his master had been so anxious, Wilkes, armed with Biran's hat and walking stick, ventured to look in at the door of the breakfast room. He was accustomed to his master's vagaries, and kindly tolerant of them. With the rest of the world, he supposed it was the portion of genius to be peculiar. He had too often seen the artist absorbed for hours doing nothing more than blowing smoke-rings into the air; what troubled him now was the absence of a cigarette from Biran's fingers that still held one of the letters received an hour ago. But seeing that his master took no heed of his discreet noise at the door, he as softly closed the door upon himself, and retired to his own pre-occupations until he should receive the summons of the bell.

At twelve o'clock the summons came. And receiving his hat and walking stick from Wilkes' hand, Biran went, without purpose or will, forth into the streets, not because he had anywhere to go or anything to do, but because he could no longer endure the blank, staring walls of the studio.

Months passed before Biran realized that at the moment of reading Elsa's letter, he accepted it as final. Weeks later, he wondered why he had not tried to see

her again. He could never quite clearly recall what had passed in his heart and his thoughts at that time; but he remembered how, slowly, carefully, he had folded Elsa's letter, carefully fitted it into the torn envelope, sat looking at the small, legible handwriting, so terribly expressive of all the letter contained. It was a little thing,—but until the letter came he had not even known Elsa's handwriting; and yet with it there before his eyes, he thought he should have known it among a thousand,—it was so relentless, like Elsa herself—unwavering, simple, inflexible. He sat looking at the square envelope as a man might look at something he had been caressing, suddenly to find it dead in his hands.

He remembered looking around for the other letter, the thin grey note from Noreen, and picking it up from the floor, and folding it too, into its envelope. Then he locked both letters away in a drawer of his desk; and mechanically looked at his watch.

He even lighted a cigarette; and left it to burn itself out. And it was not until he found himself in the street that he knew he was going to Noreen, with scarcely any hope of seeing Elsa; yet continuing on his way because there was nothing else he could do. Miss Noreen came to him at once, and gave him her hand, and he saw the kind look in her wonderful eyes; but it was of Elsa she was thinking; and Biran read his answer in her silence.

He could have smiled, but the bitter impulse died before it reached his eyes. "It is all in her letter," he said simply. If he could not speak with Elsa, why had he come? He would go. He rose from his chair; then the brief impetus of action left him; and he remained looking at Noreen, beseeching. . . . Was there nothing she could say to him? His eyes sought one of the closed

doors of the room; and suddenly his thoughts occupied themselves with material issues, sordid details, practical considerations. He turned on Noreen then, speaking rapid, incoherent words; it was his supreme right to love Elsa; she could refuse to see him, but she could not refuse him his sole right, to provide for her and the child. But Noreen stopped him with a simple gesture. "I will see that Elsa is well and sufficiently able to provide for herself and her child." There was infinite comprehension in her voice; infinite compassion; and for an instant Biran's glance leapt to hers; she was his only hope. But the actress had given her word to Elsa; and faith was steadfast in her eyes. The next instant she held out her hand in the imperious way she had; with the touch of finality; and Biran knew that thus Noreen sacrificed their intimacy, further to safeguard Elsa, whom he was never to see again.

This too he accepted in silence.

So, presently, he returned along the familiar streets to his familiar rooms, and all the world around him was strange. It was as though he had to begin his life at the very beginning of things,—he who had come to the end of all things! For was he not a man who had lost the very meaning of life itself—wife and child and love?

He was quite alone in the world, alone in his empty rooms, with only his empty heart to companion the lonely hours and years.

He even laughed aloud at the sheer irony of the thing. He who had had such an abundance of the good and lovely things of life had saved nothing for himself but loneliness and heartache.

Utterly weary now, he could find no resting place in the studio with its too-many soft chairs, its too-much

velvet. His thoughts turned to his work room for a moment; but the "Mother and Child" was there, still swathed in its disfiguring wrappings. Then, drawn irresistibly, he crossed the studio, opened the door of the work room, and went in. If there was peace for him anywhere in the world, it would be here, away from the world. He did not touch the figure standing aloof in the corner, scarcely looked at it. Inert and dejected, he sat down on the hard bench where Elsa had so often rested her tired body, silent and quiet, watching him at work.

Was it a ghost from the past that presently disengaged itself from the blackness of the room? Elsa's eyes, become the eyes of a woman, fearless of fear, all-revealing, looking out upon the world that in its turn must stop and look, if only to go on its way again, having paused.

Was it a ghost from the past, or a promise for the future?

Biran's gaze pierced the damp wrappings of the figure that loomed vague and formless in a far corner of the room. . . . At best, it was perhaps good as a physical expression of motherhood, a mother holding her child in her arms. The obliterating cloths could not hide from him memories of Elsa's eyes, lovely girl eyes; nor the remembrance of her beautiful, untried body, that he had so eagerly, so painstakingly, sought to express in the clay shaping under his hands. A fleeting thought came to him, of her physical presence here in the room with him; but the vision that illumined the darkness was of Elsa's eyes as he had last seen them, looking back at him with fearless acceptance of the knowledge of life itself come to body and soul, quickening into

being with every heart beat. A look, new and mysterious, that had not been in her eyes when he laboured so diligently to give their semblance to the world, seeing only their loveliness, and that they were gentle and tender to him. He had shaped their beauty and gentleness into the clay; but something more wonderful still than their loveliness, revealed to him in the very moment of parting, he had brought away with him into his solitude. . . .

So, life was not done with him yet. Youth had passed him by forever. Love—had not love done its best and its worst for him? But it seemed he still owed something to the world. The broken fragments falling away, might yet reveal a finer and more beautiful thing to be cherished. He had not fulfilled his promise to give the world a great musical artist. He had broken faith with Elsa; yet whatever of genius was hers, could not be lost to the world. Would it not find expression in her child? And he too would share the fruits of his love with the world; even as Elsa would bring her child into the world. There was still work for him to do.

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Dawn crept into the room, and Biran raised his head from his folded arms, where the long night had bowed it. At least, Elsa would not be alone. . . .





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"You see, Theo, it doesn't matter after all that it wasn't Miss Wingate. The only thing that matters is that it would not have been *me*, always. So you see, nothing—really—has changed. You didn't mean me to have a child. And I didn't mean to tell you—after I understood you had come to say good-bye. It doesn't really matter *why* you wanted me to go away; you should have known I would not choose to leave you. That is why it doesn't matter that it wasn't Miss Wingate. Only—I had forgotten how pretty she was—Miss Wingate—until I saw her sitting at the tea table that day. So I took the cigarette.

"You see, I came to the studio to tell you—and another girl was sitting in my place at the tea table, and I knew that her right there was better than mine, because of course I had no right there at all. But even then I wasn't sorry. Because I believe you did love me. All those months at the cottage, you did love me, Theo. Wasn't I the girl you had chosen out of the world of girls, to love? But love has never been enough for you, Theo. If today you had been just glad—but even this once you could not forget that everything between us was not quite as it should have been. Even this one time you could not love me as I wanted you to love me, taking all my love had to give you. Right away you wanted something else—wanted to make me your wife—to give me something else in the place of what I had.

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